

DOORS

DOORS

Charles Key

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ISBN #: Softcover 0-7388-2293-0

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This book is dedicated to my wife and children, my parents, my genius sister, my Aunts, my Uncles, my Cousins, my Grandparents, Marty, Zach, Geb, Donnie, Mark, the rest of my family, everyone I forgot, and the 'Grupe'. May fate smile upon us all.

PROLOGUE

Michael yelled as loud as he could. No one answered. He'd heard his Uncle Monty outside just seconds earlier. Desperately, Michael struggled against the ropes binding him. With a supreme effort he managed to get his right hand out of the bonds, bloody and strained, in order to pull the gag away from his mouth. In the second he reached for the gag in his mouth his Uncle made a noise he had never heard him make before. It sounded as if he was trying to scream but had no breath.

So, Michael yelled, *screamed*, as loud as he could. There was no reply. Distantly Michael thought he heard his Uncle muttering something. Perhaps a whisper or something said under his breath.

In the same fashion he'd kicked the door to the closet sized space that held him hundreds of times before, Michael battered the door with his feet. The door didn't budge. As he pistoned his feet against the door time and time again, he heard himself screaming still, primally. A sliver of light coming from above him illuminated his face and glistened off of the tears on his cheeks.

A gunshot punctuated Michael's tantrum and he was silent.

Michael held his breath. The gunshot came from no more than a hundred feet away. So very close to the door that he had just been kicking. Swallowing a huge lump of saliva which seemed to have suddenly grown in his mouth, Michael pushed himself up against the back wall of his tiny prison.

Footsteps. They stopped just outside the door. Michael squirmed uncontrollably, subconsciously trying to get further away from whatever was on the other side of the door. Praying, he called out.

“Uncle Monty?”

No answer. The sound of a hand on the doorknob.

“Please, let me out of here.”

No answer.

Michael began to cry hysterically.

“LET ME OUT OF HERE!”

The door swung open slowly and Michael, nearly blinded by the light behind the person standing in the doorway, squinted to see him after weeks of living in darkness. The motionless shadowy mound lying behind the man could only be one thing . . . one person.

“I can’t let you out. I’m coming in,” Michael’s captor said to him.

And Michael screamed as he went unwillingly into the beginning of his end.

CHAPTER 1

Rachael watched as Charlotte played happily in the two day old snow. Portland was fairly seasonal and had delivered snow for them at Christmas, now two days after, her daughter still enjoyed it. The cold winds of December blew by outside, licking the windows with frosty tongues.

She only wished that John, her husband, dead just under a year from a brain tumor, could be there to see her enjoying the snow. Charlotte had just celebrated her eighth birthday in November. She was old enough to miss her Daddy fiercely but not old enough to understand why.

With a sigh she looked out through the kitchen window again with cloudy eyes. Crying wasn’t an easy thing for her. She had truly loved John, who had loved both her and Charlotte without reserve. He had been a rare man, a special man. Now, he ‘slept with the angels’ at least that’s what she always told Charlotte.

Charlotte fell over the huge snowball she’d been rolling around all over the backyard trying to make a snowman. Rachael smiled, and stirred the soup on the stove.

Drifting backwards in her mind, Rachael looked into to the remarkably soothing Tomato soup. Somehow the sight and smell of the soup was a perfect catalyst to triggering memories.

“Rach, hon, could you come in here for a sec?,” John called from the bathroom. She heard Charlotte giggle. She was in for something but she didn’t particularly care. She didn’t mind looking goofy in front of those two. She couldn’t know that in a few short months there would only be one of them to look goofy in front of. Then none.

“Sure. Hang on, I’ve gotta’ check the dryer!,” she hollered as

she ran down into the basement, grabbing one of the huge squirt guns, a super-soaker, that was tucked away in their camping gear. Quickly, she filled it in their basement deep sink. Now, she was prepared for whatever they threw at her. They were looking for trouble and she was quite capable of providing it, with a grin of course.

She stalked stealthily toward the bathroom, climbing the stairs with remarkable agility, she wasn't old by any means, in fact still quite active, healthy. She hadn't even reached her sexual prime yet.

Through the kitchen, left into the hallway, down a few feet, left at the bathroom, the squirt gun hidden as well as possible behind her back. AND 'Voila!' there they were, covered in shaving cream or mousse, which one she wasn't sure, and they went for her. She didn't even have a chance to get upset with John for wasting such things and even if she'd had the time she wasn't sure she would have.

John was fast. He got to her before she could get the gun out from behind her back. He was rubbing the stuff into her hair and she was laughing. Then Charlotte was on her, wiping her shirt, her pants with the stuff. She struggled back from the two of them, to the turn in the hall, and opened up on them with the gun. John's grin faltered for a moment as the cold water hit him and Charlotte shrieked in childish pleasure. They were all smiling as John stalked toward Rachael through a steady stream of water pelting him. Charlotte hid behind him, using him as a shield as she giggled. He dripped creamy, watery stuff all over the carpet in the hallway. Rachael screamed as John almost reached her. She dropped the gun and attempted her escape. John scooped up the gun and began squirting her from behind, much to the delight of Charlotte, all the while laughing his heavy, hearty laugh. She loved that laugh.

Soup.

Rachael looked down at the soup. It was boiling. She took it off of the hot burner and set it on a cool one. She looked up from the soup and out the kitchen window. Charlotte was nowhere to be seen. Rachael felt her heart fall out of her chest.

Her face went pale. She began to panic and then saw her come around the corner of the house, pushing her huge snowball.

Taking a minute to calm herself, Rachael went to the back door. Although she hated to stop Charlotte when she was having fun, she did have to eat something. Tomato soup and Grilled Cheese sandwiches wouldn't take long. She would be back out in the yard playing just as soon as she could shovel the food into her mouth. She was wearing enough clothes for the both of them, in fact, it took ten minutes to get her ready to eat.

Charlotte's long blonde hair was wet with perspiration, which surprised Rachael. She had forgotten that you could perspire so much in such cold weather, but kids did tend to expend a lot of energy and the layers of clothes on her certainly didn't prevent perspiration.

Sitting down to the grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup, Charlotte stirred it for a moment and then looked up at Rachael.

"Mommy, do you think Daddy misses us?," Charlotte said, from out of left field. Rachael hadn't expected it.

"I, uh, yes honey, I'm sure he does, but we have to remember that Daddy is in a better place and doesn't hurt anymore. Right?"

"Uh huh, but I miss Daddy, so I just wonder if he misses me."

"Of course he does sweetie. Now eat your soup so you can go back out and finish your snowman."

"I don't wanna. I'm tired."

"Well, okay, then you don't have to go back out and finish your snowman, but you DO have to eat your soup."

"Okay Mommy."

Rachael watched the girl eat and remembered it was just as easy for kids, even as young as Charlotte, to get depressed too.

She thought things like that tended to be vaguely remembered ideas as an adult, forgetting what it was like to be a kid and getting surprised realizing how much there is that's been forgotten.

John. She missed him so much, that she hadn't forgotten.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning Rachael rose lazily at just after 9:30. She was surprised that Charlotte hadn't already woken her. Maybe, she'd been more tuckered out by her snowman endeavor than she'd shown. She strolled down the hallway toward Charlotte's room, and heard her even before she saw her. She was in a corner of her room, clutching the teddy bear that her Daddy had given her the Christmas before, crying.

Charlotte wouldn't want a teddy bear, Rachael was sure of it. John insisted that she would. They came as close to an argument as they ever did by deciding that one of them was wrong and they'd find out in time. So, he'd bought it for her on his own, even though the two of them had gotten her what seemed like a million other things for Christmas. Still, the bear had been IT. She loved it from the moment she saw it and it didn't leave her sight until she had to go back to school after the New Year.

John, as usual, had known what his little girl wanted, just as he'd always known what Rachael wanted. She hadn't always been the self confident and up front woman she was. John had a lot to do with her change, he'd been the catalyst.

Rachael stepped into Charlotte's room and looked down at her, struggling not to join her daughter in her weeping. She sat down beside Charlotte, running her hand through her hair and spoke softly. Her voice was barely audible over her daughter's muffled cries as she sobbed into the head of the bear.

"Charlotte, honey, do you want to talk about it?"

The little girl's pain and suffering seemed to explode in one giant sob.

"I miss him, Mommy! I miss Daddy sooooo much!"

Her little body shook with the force of her sobs. Rachael could do nothing more than hold her, as she'd once longed to be held, but hadn't been until John came along and made her whole. She wanted to make it all better for Charlotte. No matter what happened, no matter how much money she spent from John's insurance settlement, no matter how many tears she cried she couldn't bring him back. It would take bringing John back from the dead to make things better.

Among the many things she'd done since John died, quitting her teaching job was the only thing Rachael was sure had been absolutely right. The career would be there when she went back to it. Now she stayed home to raise her daughter and was sure that the extra time was helping both of them get through all of the turmoil and frustration over the loss. Nevertheless, at times like these she wanted to do more. She couldn't.

John had been smart enough to take the money out of his associates salary at his law firm to pay for a substantial life insurance policy. He had always grumbled about how much it cut into the family budget but in the end it had paid off, unfortunately. He'd taken out the policy just before he and Rachael married, and it was worth just under 3 million with all of its options. Rachael nor Charlotte would ever want for ANYTHING if it was used right. He'd gone so quickly once his brain tumor had been diagnosed. His headaches, which he'd had for years, turned out to be a tumor which killed him in just months. So fast, in fact, the insurance company didn't have time to cancel the policy.

Charlotte cried for what seemed like hours, all the while Rachael dammed up her own tears threatening to come flooding to get out of her eyes. When it was all done, she dozed off in a series of less and less audible whimpers while Rachael rocked her in her arms. Rachael tucked her in her bed and went off to do her own crying. She'd done a lot of that before John, crying alone. She supposed she'd be doing a lot more crying alone, perhaps for the rest of her life.

When Charlotte woke up again, at about 1:00 in the afternoon, Rachael's crying was finished and Charlotte was anxious to

get back to the construction of her snowman. Rachael bundled her up in enough clothing for an entire orphanage and sent her outside. She insisted on going out into the front yard to get the “good” snow. Rachael finally gave up on fighting the little girl and told her to stay out of the street. She was just as amazed at her resilience as she had been with her unexpected depression.

She went into the kitchen, poured some of the hot chocolate she’d made for the two of them, and grabbed a book to read as she watched Charlotte through the picture window in the front room. She was a little overprotective. Couldn’t hurt.

The book, ‘The Stand’ by Stephen King, was one of her favorites and she consumed it slowly like a good meal, but unfortunately dozed off during one of her favorite parts.

She came to. Immediately, she looked at the clock. Only about 25 minutes. It was ten to 2. She looked out the front window. No Charlotte. Her heart skipped a beat. Then she remembered the day before and forced herself to calm down.

She stood and walked to the window, seeing the whole yard and half the street. No Charlotte. The snowball sat in the middle of the yard, all alone. Fear crept in slowly, disguising itself as anger. Rachael stomped into the kitchen. She’d be sure not to let her go out in the snow again today. She was probably behind the house. She wasn’t visible through the kitchen window into the back yard. Rachael began to breathe heavily, getting anxious. She opened the sliding door into the backyard and stepped out onto the top step, covered in snow, and looked around the corner of the house. No sign of her.

Rachael ran back into the house, leaving the sliding door wide open. Moving too fast in order to find Charlotte she took a spill on the kitchen linoleum, barking her knees. Recovering as fast as she could she quickly slipped on her shoes and grabbed her dead husband’s thick, long, London Fog trench coat. She went out the front door and down the driveway. The street wasn’t ever cluttered with cars and the houses were all set back from the street, which made the view fairly clear. No Charlotte.

She had progressed past angry to genuinely worried, scared.

She looked into the grass, covered with snow, trying to discern where the little girl had gone. Her footprints were all over the yard, except right down by the street. The only footprints in the driveway were hers, none of Charlotte’s. Her daughter’s tracks were restricted to the yard, except four which walked into the invisible forbidden zone. The one Rachael imagined Charlotte had created in her mind when her mother had told her to stay out of the street. Rachael could actually see it in her head.

The four footprints belonged to her daughter. They crossed the forbidden zone, went to the curb, where the fourth footprint was cut in half by the nothingness of empty space below the curb. She looked at the street. Only one footprint. It was a different shoe, a BIG one. A man’s shoe.

Rachael began to scream, “Charlotte! Charlotte!”

Just four hours later, Rachael had managed to get all of the neighbors who were home involved in trying to find her daughter. A group of them combed the block, and the two on either side of them. Some of the neighbors weren’t bothered, or weren’t home. The Rolands were notoriously private and so no one spoke to them. The Greens were out of town, spending time at their cabin in Prineville for the holidays. Mr. Kirk was in Indiana visiting family. The rest of them had either been spoken to or were helping in the search for Charlotte Vondralin. Their faces were remarkably expressive of the despair they felt. Somehow they KNEW the girl was nowhere to be found.

No one had seen anything of consequence. Mr. Wright had seen a few cars go by but nothing out of the ordinary. The Deardorffs had heard someone honk their horn about noon and seen a stray dog wander through their front yard at a little after noon but they’d only been near their window for that little bit. The rest were about the same, nothing unusual worth noting.

The police, fortunately, were markedly anxious to help. They waived their 24 hour rule allowing them to start looking for Charlotte immediately and getting information from Rachael to start the appropriate paperwork in motion. They were assuming that

someone had either kidnapped the girl, or, god forbid, something worse. They didn't figure that an eight year old girl would get the urge to run away in this kind of weather, it was just as possible as anything else but it didn't seem likely in this situation as far as they were concerned. Other than comfort, the help the police offered was ineffective and for the most part useless. After ten hours of looking, neighbors and police began to disperse. It was nearing ten o'clock and Rachael was very close to hysterics. At midnight, with apologies, one of the policemen, an Officer Michaels, told her the department would contact her in the morning and in the meanwhile they would contact the F.B.I. about the situation. They had taken pictures of the footprints including the BIG print, but there was little else that could be done. She sat on her porch, bundled up in the same coat and shoes she'd put on at two that afternoon until the phone rang the next morning at 8:30.

The phone call she received was a terse one. Quick, concise, and with no indication of emotion. The person on the other end of the line told her that the F.B.I. could not get involved in an investigation of her daughters disappearance unless there was either an indication of foul play, or the police department officially requested their help.

According to the Portland Police Department, they could not officially request help from the Federal Bureau of Investigation until the girl had been missing at least 48 hours.

So, at 9:00 am on December 29, Rachael Vondralin found there wasn't a damned thing anyone would or could seem to do for her until the thirtieth. And what little the police department would do most likely would turn out to be useless. Of course, the police and the F.B.I. would wind up treating it as a runaway case. The footprint meant nothing to them, pictures or not. However, it was a huge symbol in her mind of where her daughter was. She couldn't be dead. Her mind wouldn't even consider the possibility.

At two that same afternoon, the police showed up promptly, with a dozen civilians who had volunteered to help with the situation, after seeing a blurb about it on the morning news. She wasn't sure how the news had caught wind of it, but she didn't mind the

help, although she didn't expect any results from their civic minded kindness. At most, they'd get recognition for trying. She knew in her heart that Charlotte wouldn't be found.

At least by the people, the volunteers, present there at 2:00, on that day.

The day passed, crawling like a crippled roach, with most of the volunteers gone by 8, and everyone gone at 10. She didn't stop combing the nearby areas, in wider and wider circles, until well after 4 in the morning. She refused to accept what she knew deep inside. She knew that her daughter would not be found near her home, if she was found at all. Rachael, not surprisingly, found nothing. Shock had set in so deep in her that she didn't notice that the mucus coming out of her nose had frozen solid, like glaze on a donut. Her face was nearly as white as the snow on the ground around her and her ears were purple. She walked the distance home, just over a half mile, and was unconscious as soon as she hit the mattress.

Someone downtown in the Police department seemed to be watching out for her. Just minutes after 2 an Agent Fitzgerald of the F.B.I. called to inform her he'd be over to see her at exactly three that afternoon. That morning, the volunteers showing up again, the search for Charlotte had started again. The search had widened to a four mile radius. It wasn't as if she was in lost in Yellowstone park or the Gobi Desert, it was Portland, Oregon, a small chunk of it at that, and the chance of her just being lost there was small, astronomically small. She walked to school every-day on those streets. It was a last ditch effort.

Rachael realized then, that day, that if Charlotte was to be found that no one but her would be able to find her. Somehow that thought did not comfort her.

Being a part of the search for her daughter, Rachael was down by the grade school, a mile and a half away, when it came time to meet with the F.B.I. agent. The same officer who had been watching out for her the previous night drove her home to await the arrival of the agent, and left her to resume his part in the search for her daughter.

CHAPTER 3

The waiting was over. She watched the man come up the walkway. It had to be the F.B.I. agent. No one else would dress that way in the kind of weather they were having. Tall, lanky, and sort of awkward looking, not the sort of man you'd expect to be an F.B.I. agent though. His thin, wispy hair blew in the bitter wind, and his dark overcoat hung off of him like he was a hanger. For a split second she could see his gun in its shoulder holster as the wind inspected the inside of his coat. Rachael had sat staring out of the window since she'd walked through the door waiting for him, she wasn't surprised when he arrived. His knock lent credence to the fact that he was, in fact, an F.B.I. agent, three solid raps on the solid wood door. No doorbell or gawking, just standing with hands clasped behind his back waiting for the door to open.

She observed him through the peephole for only a moment, and she could see in his eyes that he had no desire to be standing on the porch, or anywhere near it. It was a have to help situation, rather than a want to help one. He looked like he didn't get many chances to work on big things like, uh, animal neglect.

For a moment Rachael wondered if she was being too judgmental, then decided she didn't care . . . it wasn't his daughter who had disappeared.

His expression never changed, even as she opened the door. His mouth moved, seemingly of its own accord, as he spoke.

"Mrs. Vondralin?"

"Yes. Come in Mr. Fitzgerald."

"AGENT Fitzgerald," he stressed. She assumed he didn't hear it very often, undoubtedly it boosted his ego.

"AGENT Fitzgerald, yes. Come in," Rachael said, her arms tightly crossed across her chest.

"Mrs. Vondralin, are you aware that it's nearly as cold inside your house as it is outside?"

She didn't quite know how to react to the question. He wasn't being sarcastic. She immediately noticed that she could see her vaporous breath as she exhaled. The temperature hadn't been in her thoughts much in the past two days. She walked to the thermostat and the temperature indicator was at 41 degrees. She was shocked, it made her realize how close to the edge she was. She'd lived on that familiar edge for most of her young life, but it had been a long time since she'd been so close to it. She turned on the heat, to the highest temp, and went back to AGENT Fitzgerald.

"Sorry about that, I've had my mind on other things."

"I'm sure, ma'am," he nodded, feigning emotion.

She glanced at his ring finger and it was naked as a jaybird. Therefore, one more indicator that he probably didn't give a damn about her daughter.

She and AGENT Fitzgerald went into the living room and she offered him a seat. He sat efficiently, like a man who was in a hurry and she was sure he was.

"Mrs. Vondralin, the Bureau," (she thought of the dresser as he said it), "would like to extend every possible consideration to you in this case, especially since an officer involved in the initial contact insists that he believes, along with yourself, that there was a third party involved in the disappearance of your daughter. We have opened a case file and will spend as much time as possible exploring leads that come our way, along with any pertinent information that we happen across or find here today. Anything you can tell us might help us determine the location and facilitate the return of your daughter. I'm aware that you probably don't feel you have ANY valuable information that could help us find your daughter, and if you did have any you probably would have already found her yourself, however, you may have overlooked something which could be helpful. So, now, if you don't mind I'd like to ask you a few questions."

She suddenly felt as if she were being interrogated, as if someone was going to infer she'd done something to Charlotte. It immediately made her angry and very defensive. She felt herself flushing hotly, partially from the increasing heat in the house and partially in frustration at the insensitivity of the FBI.

"No, AGENT Fitzgerald, I don't mind answering your questions." She smirked a little. He had looked a bit startled when she'd stressed his title again, a tad too loudly.

"Um, well, yes. First of all, did you and your daughter have any sort of conflicts recently? Over anything. Food, television, bed-time, ANYTHING."

She paused for a second, wanting to be absolutely sure she wasn't passing over anything. There was the chance that she HAD run off, she didn't want to prevent her return by assuming she knew what had happened. She couldn't think of a fight, an argument, a disagreement of any kind in the past few days, WEEKS. Charlotte had always been well mannered, well behaved, and very loving.

"No, Agent Fitzgerald, I'm not aware of any sort of conflicts that Charlotte and I might have had. We haven't really had any in, hell, in months."

He was bent over the legal pad, leather bound, his Cross pen waiting to jot down important facts. He glanced up at her with eyes full of distrust and disgust upon hearing her. It was obvious to Rachael he didn't want to be there, nor did he think there was a reason to be there.

"You're sure? Nothing at all?"

"Nothing. The last fight I can remember us having was on New Years Eve, LAST YEAR. That was over whether or not she could have a sip of my drink." John had died three weeks later in a hospital bed. She remembered the instance quite clearly.

"What sort of drink?"

She didn't understand where the question was coming from. Rachael sat forward and put her palms on her thighs.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Well, was the drink alcoholic?"

"Yes, so—" She realized what he was getting at, "I won the argument. My daughter did not have any of my drink, nor do I let her near the three bottles of alcohol that are in this house. All of which are in a locked cupboard above the stove. It's out of her reach and she doesn't know how to open it." She was sure she was flushed, and she was no longer uncertain of why. Rachael was now quite sure that she didn't like this man.

"Uh, yes. Has your daughter had any problems at school?"

Again, a second to think. No problems, a little trouble in math. Didn't like her gym teacher. Nothing important, but just in case . . .

"She didn't like her gym teacher and she was having a little trouble with dividing fractions."

Again, a look. Just disgust. No need to lie about something like that, she figured, at least not as far as AGENT Fitzgerald was concerned.

"Well, um, how about your husband, any problems with him?"

She felt her jaw go slack. She'd told the police her husband was dead. She'd made it quite clear. She had watched the officer write it down twice. The bastard in front of her, who obviously thought that Charlotte had run away or that she had done something with her, didn't even take the time to read the information he'd been given. She noticed folded pages, tucked behind his legal pad. She had a feeling those were copies of what little information there was. He probably just looked at her name and took the rest of the information from the officer over the phone. She really hated the bastard in front of her.

She held back. Not because the guy wasn't first class spam, that he was, but because he could help her. He had the unlimited resources of the entire F.B.I. at his disposal. She spoke, trying to sound calm.

"My husband is dead Agent Fitzgerald and has been for nearly a year. I told that to the officers I spoke to when this all started." A quick glance at the papers, and she knew she'd been right about him. For a split second guilt crossed his face.

"Oh, um, well, I'm sorry. I, uh, wasn't aware of that," he paused, again feigning emotion, sort of like a moment of silence at a baseball game, "Was, uh, your daughter dealing with the death of your husband well? Any difficulties?"

She wanted to scream at him. Of course she was having difficulties, her father is dead you pompous ass! She held back, again.

"Yes, she was upset, and it didn't just go away, but she was dealing with it well."

"Um, as far as you could tell, right?"

"No, she *was* dealing with it well."

"Um, yes." He wrote.

Somehow, she knew that was it. He'd decided. Whatever he'd cooked up in his head was done. He was going to display it at the office and Charlotte's paperwork would wind up in the round file.

He asked a few more rudimentary questions, how old are you, your daughter, was she born here in Portland, Oregon, what school did she go to, what friends did she have. All in the past tense when referring to Charlotte. It scared and angered her.

He stood when he was finished, a signal of sorts that he was through with her. He turned an about face toward the door.

"That's about it, Mrs. Vondralin. Uh, I'll keep in touch, let you know if anything new comes up. Um, is there anything else you can think of that would be useful?"

"The footprint. The one that was out by the curb where Charlotte's stopped. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Footprints in the snow? That could have been there for days. No, I wouldn't put too much effort into that one. Probably meaningless."

"Someone should put some effort into it," Rachael said, shaking her head angrily. He just shrugged in response.

She walked him to the door, quiet all the way. She opened the door for him and let him out. He turned to her.

"Um, should you need to contact me about anything, or if something comes to your attention that you think is important,

then call me at this number," he handed her a card, "and ask for AGENT Fitzgerald."

She took the card and smiled. She started to close the door as he walked away but he turned to speak one last time.

"Good day, Mrs. Vondralin."

"Fuck you, AGENT Fitzgerald," she spat, and slammed the door.

She spent the rest of the day crying, sulking, worrying. She'd never wanted 25 minutes back like she wanted those 25 back when she'd fallen asleep with the book in her lap. There were so many events in her life that she'd like to change, and if she had to isolate one her 25 minutes of sleep would be it.

Rachael knew Charlotte hadn't run away. She also knew that the help from the police and F.B.I. were just shy of useless. She might be able to use some of their assistance, but they weren't going to go out of their way. It seemed finding Charlotte was up to her since none of the powers that be would or could do a damn thing for her.

CHAPTER 4

Rachael Clark, the third child and only girl of parents who 'enjoyed the bottle' more than most, was born on a hot, gusty day in June. June 28, 1958. Born a month premature, underweight, and not fully developed, she wasn't expected to live. Her life expectancy at the time of birth was about two days. From day one of her life she was a fighter. Miraculously after two days near death in a small hospital in Klamath Falls, Oregon, she began to breathe on her own, and began to take mother's milk a day after.

That was the only time in her life, until her husband John, she ever completely depended on anyone.

By the age of four she had come to understand the way things were in her world in Southern Oregon. Her two brothers, the younger of the two a full four years older than her, were treated as human beings. She was, for whatever reason, was treated as a thing.

Her father, a man of low character and of no particular beliefs, worked aboard the Air National Guard Base in Klamath, as an enlisted man. He was a staff sergeant by the time Rachael had come into the world. She would live to see him broken down to nothing, to her pleasure, but as a child he had his way with her in every possible way. She was a many things to him, none of them good. A gopher, getting his beer for him, cleaning up his messes. A whipping post for a release of his anger when his mother wasn't around. Worst of all, she was a release of his sexual tension.

At eight years old she had already begun to consider suicide as a possible escape from her situation. Times being as they were did not allow for any sort of outside intervention into the horrid family situation she found herself in. It came down to her and him. If she wanted something to change she

would have to engineer that change. Eight years old, she didn't feel capable of changing her clothes effectively, let alone changing her situation. Her mother was of no help, she took routine beatings from her father and spent the rest of her time in the bottom of a Hood River Vodka bottle.

Then, only days before she was planning to kill herself, she discovered a way to initiate a change that would save the very life she had been planning to end. She found a way to manipulate her father.

Although he would beat her mother, he did not beat or touch the children in her presence. Over the course of Rachael's life up until that point she had gotten used to not being hit around her mother. If her mother was around, her father would beat her up and leave Rachael alone. So, although it was beneficial to be around her mother, it didn't make her feel any better to see her mother being punched, slapped, and kicked according to her father's whim.

This was cemented in her mind when, for whatever reason, her mother returned home while her father was working himself up to kick the snot out of Rachael. The argument was always one sided, with questions that would get a painful physical retaliation regardless of whether or not she responded. Rachael was standing near the door, almost next to the hinges, with her father towering over her. Tears of frustration and helplessness rolled down her cheeks as her father yelled accusatory questions at her.

His hand was cocked back to strike her when she and her father heard the jingle of her mother's keys in the door as she was returning. Immediately he turned toward the kitchen and stalked away. Rachael's mother entered, paying her no attention, and went into the kitchen to open her vodka. Within minutes her father was taking out his frustrations on her mother, but she knew then that he wouldn't hit her while her mother was around. It was more than 'wouldn't' Rachael would find out. It was an unwritten rule.

Perhaps, something had happened to HER as a child, but when Rachael inadvertently found out the extent of this unwritten rule and how it could help her, plans of suicide disappeared and she began to fight.

His control over her and her mother was an inexplicable kind. He wasn't ever directly affectionate to either of them, but her mother's scars and bruises were outwardly visible and Rachael's were hidden but in many ways just as evident by way of her quiet, introverted personality and her flinching at the sound of her father's raised voice. Her mother, Janet, had grown up in an abusive family situation, but unlike Rachael, Janice had grown up in a well off family. Her father, Rachael's grandfather, owner of a sheet metal company, had done very well for himself in the second World War, and Korea, but it didn't make him any less of a bastard. She dealt with the abuses he gave and with the ones that her husband James dished out to her, but she, like every parent who remembers the one thing about childhood that they'd change, swore her children would never be BEATEN or TOUCHED in any way that they shouldn't. She didn't see a problem with an occasional spanking or a swat on the mouth if it got dirty, but nothing like what she'd had to endure. Of course, she got over this psychological time bomb in her head by drinking Vodka like water. Drinking made her considerably less observant of the situation between her husband and her daughter than she would have been otherwise. In fact, Rachael, along with her brothers Mike and Robby, had no idea that her mother gave a damn about them. She seemed to be more concerned with the temperature of her drink.

Rachael inadvertently came into partial possession of the knowledge of her mother's hard streak, her slight bit of maternal feeling, when her father came into her room late one night in the summer of 1966 when Rachael was still just 8 years old. She wouldn't understand or be told the entire story until just before her mother's death in 1984. The knowledge was nothing more than a tool at the time she found out, however, a tool to perhaps save her life, and at least her sanity.

He came strolling in, acting as if he was checking up on her as he always did at first, looking at her as she tried to feign sleep, rubbing his crotch. A solid lump would grow there, get bigger. She knew what it was, she'd seen it MANY times before. He came

to sit next to her on the side of her rickety, squeaky old bed, smiling his crooked toothed grin, a shiny film of sweat on his face. The darkened, wet underarms of his undershirt were like symbols of his hidden, disgusting habit.

Rachael felt sick, full of rage. She whimpered, involuntarily, wanting him to go away, to just disappear, unanswered tears of anguish, ANGER, slid down her face as he unbuttoned the top button of his pants.

She was shaking, so helpless to stop him, no idea why it was happening to her, only knowing it was wrong, and she wanted to scream, but she'd felt his crushing grip on her neck before, she knew what would happen if she tried to call out. Not that there was anyone to call out to.

He slowly pulled the sheets back off of her tiny body, and smiled through her, not AT her, as if he was seeing something else. His smell was evident and the shadow of his maleness, a lurking silhouette, showed over the ridge of his leg.

She clutched her fists, not wanting to see it, feel it, know of it. Her fingernails bit deep into her palms, drawing unseen blood, unfelt pain. Her breath stopped, held in her lungs in anticipation of an unspeakable act performed by the loins of the man who had helped to create her. Every muscle in her body tightened in horrible anticipation.

Then, she heard the shuffling footsteps in the hallway.

For a second she thought she had been dreaming it, WISHING it, but it came again, louder. Her father stopped, halfway turned toward her, his member an evil exclamation point in the night. She let out a hitching, sighing whimper, just barely loud enough to hear. His hand shot to her neck, clutching, crushing. The other fumbled clumsily with himself, trying to button his pants, fix his shirt. The footsteps sped up, not running, but a brisk walk. One word spoken in the silence: "Don't," as the hand tightened painfully for a moment, then released.

He stood and quickly arranged himself and leapt across the

room to the window looking out at their backyard as her mother came into the room.

She waited for harsh, quick words from her father, expelling her mother from the room so that the situation could go on, belittling and eating up another chunk of her young soul, but no such thing happened. For a moment nothing was said, no movements made. Mother standing in the doorway, eyes seeming to widen in the dim light, to grow powerful, accusing, SOBER. Father, face turned to the window, moonlight illuminating his harsh, sharp features, trying desperately to ignore her, looking guilty wanting to be innocent, but oh SO guilty.

Three quick steps and she was on top of him. A quick, half slap, half punch to his nose as he turned. His head banged the window, rattling it, making a remarkably soothing noise for Rachael. She watched his upper lip and nostrils grow dark, with blood flowing from his nose. He clutched his damaged nose in his hands and retreated from her. Rachael watched, enthralled.

His posture straightened after a moment, his hands dropping away from his face. Rachael could hear a soft dripping sound as his blood fell to the floor. He raised his hand as if to slap his wife.

Rachael thought it was over, she was sure that her mother could do nothing to her father, nothing to stop him from beating the living hell out of her. Two inches shorter and 60 pounds lighter there wasn't much of a chance if he decided to beat her. This was proven by the testimony of bruises and cuts past. BUT, at that moment as he raised his hand back over his head, she stood her ground, no flinching as she'd seen her mother do in the past, no cry before he smashed his fist into her, just defiant challenge, silent and communicated in her stance. She slapped him again, across his face, surely reddening his cheek, but not visible in the dark, but the sound was audible, a CRACK, and his hand dropped. He pushed Rachael's mother out of the way and left the room, her mother following.

She lay awake in anticipation of his return, sure that he was going to leave her mother bruised and bloody in their room, in

order to come back and finish with her. Time crept by too slowly unpunctuated by the typical screaming and sounds of scuffle. Rachael began to think that he had perhaps killed her. Then, her voice rang out, clean, clear, without slur. It was loud, righteous, and ANGRY.

"You WILL NOT touch her!"

A movement, like a chair scooting. A grunt, deep like he was lifting something heavy. The squeaking of the bed. Shuffling footsteps again, her mother's slippers.

Her mother came into the room, the light still off, never looking for or trying to turn it on, and sat next to Rachael, in a spot uncomfortably close to where her father had so many times. She spoke in a loving voice for the first of a handful of times in Rachael's life.

"Are you alright, Rachael?," her voice was clear and her breath smelled, but for the first time she recalled, not of alcohol. She didn't look drunk. Mom looked clear eyed, in possession of all her faculties.

"Yes, mom," she was waiting for her to do something, to hurt her like her father had, she was so sure she would, she didn't, COULDN'T, trust ANYONE if she couldn't trust her father.

"Did he hurt you?"

"Uh . . . I . . . he," she started to cry, so scared, afraid of the hand, the crushing grip, of the thing in his pants, of never leaving this place she was trapped in.

"It's alright honey. He'll never hurt you again. Not anymore."

She began to cry in wailing sobs, nearly screaming in anguish, her mother held her, most likely not out of maternal instinct, but out of understanding of the fact that she had married a man very much like her father, too much like her father.

She only spoke one more sentence, rocking Rachael gently all the while. It would put Rachael to sleep before she could say anything else, before she could tell her mother her pains and her hurts or to ask for help. In the words she spoke was a key of sorts, a key out of at least one of her father's cages she'd have to escape to make it out of childhood alive.

"If he ever tries to touch you, EVER, you tell me, yell for me, whatever, I'll take care of it."

The key to release her from her father's abuse was invisible, but very powerful.

The next day, at breakfast, her father would not meet her eyes, but neither would her mother. Vodka accompanied her meal in place of the milk for her father, brothers, and herself. A slight bruise showed on the side of her father's face and his nose was just a bit red.

The day passed with her father gone, off at the base, and her waiting for night to fall. Almost curious to see what would happen, to see if she could truly let go of the fears and terrors of the night that had been with her since she was four years old.

He came, as he always did, strolling in toward the window.

She watched him but instead of feeling the familiar fear, the terror, the clutching fists, and held breath, she felt . . . she felt defiant.

An image of her mother, shorter, smaller than her father, slapping him across the face, boiled in her brain, eating at her fear like an acid. She watched him come and felt her jaw clamp down in anger, GENUINE anger, not anger caused by helplessness.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. Rubbed his crotch. He seemed to wince, to be in pain as he did it, although it didn't stop him. She knew her mother wouldn't be coming this time.

He began to draw back the covers.

"Don't," she said, her voice clear, without a tremble, a crack, a waver.

He hesitated for a moment and put his hand to her neck, clutching.

She spoke. Just at conversation level, but it got the point across. "MOM."

His grip tightened. Instinctively, Rachael grabbed him, grabbed the things under the pointy part of him and squeezed like he was squeezing her neck. His grip immediately loosened and his face went white.

For nearly half a minute he didn't move, he only looked at his daughter with eyes burning with hate, a hate that she supposed applied to all women, perhaps all other people. Then, he stood on shaky legs and walked toward the door. He looked back at her only once and pitifully spoke his threat, one that would never be followed through, not because of lack of effort.

"I'm gonna kill you, little girl. Daddy is gonna kill you."

She didn't feel particularly scared.

The only other important thing that her mother ever said about that night was much later, not too long before Rachael married John. It was the same time that she told Rachael about her own family and her abuse. Her mother explained that she had kicked him in the testicles when he had tried to beat her. She assumed that was why he was wincing when he was rubbing himself and why it affected him so strongly when she'd grabbed him.

Her nights weren't ever interrupted in such a fashion by her father again. Not that he was finished with her by a longshot.

CHAPTER 5

On her tenth birthday she found out how her father planned to kill her. It was his birthday present to her, amidst those from her one aunt on her mother's side, from her two brothers and her mother. His was a 'special' one he told the family members present. Rachael didn't have any friends to speak of, she was a little too introverted to make friends, not without reason, and as a result her party consisted of immediate family, minus grandparents on both sides. Her father's were dead and her mother's weren't welcomed into the house except at Christmas when they'd fly in from Kansas.

She had gotten a dress from her brothers, a pair of conservative but durable shoes from her slurring mother, and a package of socks from her aunt.

Her brothers had lost interest as soon as the cake had been served and were outside burning off the sugar they'd just introduced into their system. Her mother and aunt were talking about something back in Kansas and the 'special' gift her father had told everyone about came out while no one but the two of them were paying attention.

They were wrapped poorly, in the classified section of the Oregon Journal, and tied with twine, the same twine the neighbors used to tie the legs of the chickens when they cut their heads off.

She opened up the package to find a pair of rawhide Wells-Fargo work gloves. The fact that they were gloves weren't a big deal. In fact, they would have been helpful if they had just been gloves, but they were WORK gloves. It was an unexpected gift and a misunderstood one. The reasoning behind it eluded her.

He knelt down next to her, sitting in a chair from the kitchen table, and spoke in a whisper.

"You're gonna work with the boys. Balin' hay, scooping cow shit, and whatever other bullshit work Mr. Graham can find for you. AND it's gonna break your fuckin' back little woman, not to mention your will." He smiled. He was pretty sure that he had her. He was sure she couldn't handle herself. He was right.

At ten years old, she was just over 4 and a half feet tall.

Pretty tall for a ten year old, but she was lanky and had no muscle at all, she was, in fact, a weakling. Odds were that the work would kick her ass. Which was exactly what he wanted. If she quit, if she couldn't hack it, then she'd be finished, not literally dead, but at least worthless, without dignity. Which was all she really had to fight for, it was all she really had at all.

She had no choice in the matter. The reason behind the boys getting the job was to earn money for college, hers was just to earn money. At least that was how her father would justify it.

Her oldest brother, Robby, was 16 that summer, and would go off to Vietnam in 1970, and die sleeping in a foxhole as a Vietcong regular dropped a grenade on he and his partner. His 'college' money would go toward Mom's move to Portland. Mike, 14 at the time, would wind up in jail for murder two days after his 18th birthday. In a jealous rage, nearly as stupid as his father's, he had killed a man at a pizza parlor for mistaking his pizza for Mike's. Being as wise as his father as well, he stood over the body of the man he had beaten to death, kicking and stomping him, until the cops had arrived. Mike would die, being raped and then beaten to death in prison just a year after his conviction. His 'college' money would wind up going to his illegitimate daughter, who died in a car accident two years after his incarceration, along with her mother. Rachael would wind up being the only one to use the money she'd earn, the money that her father assured her would amount to a couple of pennies and a turd to float em' on.

Mr. Graham, her involuntary benefactor, was an old man with a HUGE farm in Keno, Oregon, about seven minutes outside of

Klamath Falls, who hired out a few kids each summer to help him do whatever he needed done. The pay was good but he squeezed every ounce of work possible out of the kids for the money he paid them. If they couldn't produce he'd have them off of his property by the end of the day. He'd had only one other girl work for him in his 25 years of hiring kids for the summer. She'd been just under six feet at the age of 13, and weighed nearly 175 pounds.

So, after token resistance from her mother, and jibes from her brothers, she went later in the week, on the first of July, to work for Mr. Graham, with her Wells-Fargo gloves.

"Well, how are ya' boys?," he walked up to Mike and Robby individually, shaking their hands, and addressing them each in turn. There were two other boys she didn't know. One was a boy named Greg, who looked about Robby's age, and the other a boy named Wesley who looked a little older than Rachael but not as old as Mike. She was, as expected, the only girl.

Dressed in loose coveralls, a flannel shirt, beat up military style leather boots, and a bandanna tied around her head, she looked like a character out of a Little Rascals short.

He sent all of the boys off individually, assigning each a chore, without ever addressing Rachael. In fact, he never even looked at her until they were all out of sight.

"Well, Miss Clark. What do you suppose we can find for you to do?," he said with a barely perceptible smirk.

She studied him, untrusting, trying to read his weathered face, wrinkled and pockmarked from time. His eyes were difficult to read, but there didn't seem to be any double meaning to what he was asking. He seemed a happy sort of guy.

She shrugged her shoulders, prepared for the axe to fall. On the one hand she desperately wanted to succeed but on the other hand she couldn't imagine being able to do as much work as her brothers or any of the boys for that matter. Rachael decided it was only a matter of time before she couldn't do anymore, before the work the man was sure to give her would get the best of her. She wanted to start and get it over with as soon as possible.

"Come 'ere. Over to the stable," he said, with something changing in the tone of his voice.

She walked in, immediately counted the individual stalls, 12, and looked up at Mr. Graham.

"I want all of these here horse stalls, cleaned out, new hay, floor swept out, walls washed down, bits, halters, and everything put away in their right place. By one," he smiled, a genuine enough smile, but she thought she'd figured out the part of it that was just behind the happy, jolly exterior. Sadism. Of course, she didn't know the word at the time, she thought of it as 'liking to be mean to people,'—it was sadism plain and simple, but it was well paid sadism so there wasn't much cause to complain. Four hours to clean all of the stables, put everything away . . .

"AND sweep out the throughway here, rake out the hay and all that crap."

She nodded. Definitely a long day, but at least it wasn't something she couldn't do. She could do it but it would wear her out. Nothing too heavy and as long as she could stand the smell of horse manure and piss in hay, stand raking it outside into a pile, and wiping it off the walls, she could do it. Maybe, just maybe she'd make it.

One o'clock came around fast and caught her napping. She was asleep in the fresh hay she'd laid in the stall she was in. Covered in shit, piss, dirty water, haydust, and various other things, she snored to the tune of sawing logs.

She awoke to Mr. Graham's voice hollering from the other end of the stables.

"Miss Clark! MISS Clark!"

"Here I am, Mr. Graham," she said, walking, shoulders hung forward, out of the stall she was in. She'd only finished the one side of the stables. She knew that she was done for.

She walked toward him, watching the ground move under her feet. He spoke to her in an almost annoyed tone.

"I see ya' managed to finish it all."

She jerked her head up and to the right, the side of the stables

she'd left basically untouched. It was all done, along with the left. She didn't know how to act, react.

"Well, I have to admit I didn't think ya' had it in ya'. Still, since you put in such a work of effort, I suppose you're in for the same lunch as the res' of em' gets," and he waved her on, to follow. She went into his house and ate the remnants of food that the boys had left behind.

She never found out who finished the job she'd left half done, but always suspected her brothers, for whatever reason, and as a result of the scare it gave her, she never let herself rest in the middle of work again.

The summer was long and each day Mr. Graham made it tougher and tougher for her. Her second week he had her placing bales of hay out for grazing. By carrying them from the barn out into the field. In her case it was more like dragging, but she did it, even though there was a truck completely capable of driving them out there so they could just be thrown off.

Several times during the summer she was sure she was going to give out, not from lack of drive, but from lack of energy. Fatigue was a word too mild to describe how worn out she was. Rachael would go home, have just enough energy to bathe and change clothes before literally passing out in her bed.

She made it all the way through the summer, never missing a day from July 1, to September 20 when school started that year. All the money was in the bank with her name on it, just over 300 dollars, a lot for 1968. It was the beginning of the 8,000 dollars that she saved up, so that in 1976 she could go to Southern Oregon College in Ashland, about 50 miles away, and get her teaching degree.

It hadn't killed her, it had made her stronger. She even made a sort of friend in Wesley, one of the other boys who had worked with her at Mr. Graham's farm. She never saw him again after that summer and hadn't seen him before, but it at least gave her a little hope that one day she would, could, have friends.

Four summers, counting the first when she was 10, went by in similar fashion, busting ass for Mr. Graham, baling hay, cleaning

out horse stalls, and a million other tasks that varied from year to year. Rachael made all the money she could. In fact, she'd occasionally work for him during the school year, earning money when she could. Robby quit working there two years after she started and Mike three. To her father's dismay, she proved to be more reliable than the both of her brothers. He became less powerful and more vindictive when it came to Rachael, and by her 14th birthday, just before she was due to start her work for Mr. Graham, he told her she was going away.

He had decided, without the consent of her mother, along with her grandfather, to have her spend a summer in Kansas, working with him at his sheet metal plant as a janitor of sorts.

He'd pay her one thousand dollars if she did everything he needed. Her father, whether he was consciously aware of it or not, would not be in a position to enjoy his little victory for long.

She arrived at her grandparent's house late in the night on the 3rd of July, two days after she would have started work at Mr. Graham's, filled with the energy she always had built up in reserve to work for the old man. In the four years she'd worked for him, she'd grown to just a hair over of 5 feet, and 120 pounds of nearly pure muscle, excluding parts of her growing of hormonal accord rather than by hard work.

The 4th of July was a spectacular show of her grandfather's influence in the region they lived in. Everyone came and spoke to him, some tried to solicit to him, half of the billboards in town were for York Sheet Metals. The social affair was by far more dazzling to Rachael than the fireworks.

Rachael spent the day around people who were kind to her. Some of them even asked about what she liked to do or what she wanted to be when she grew up. For a short time that night, she was happy. She had never been to that sort of social event and never even realized such a thing existed. It was fantastic and if she could have she would have stayed there forever. She was, in that environment, amidst hundreds of people and yet completely alone. It allowed her to satisfy the person she was, shy and secretive, and

the person she wanted to be, outgoing and extroverted. Until she met John, Rachael would not feel that way again.

Rachael started her new job the next day, the fifth. The job would be seven days a week, excluding holidays, eight hours a day. A pushbroom and a warehouse the size of Iowa. She was supposed to sweep every square foot. Not a problem. She had eight hours. She was used to having to finish jobs that big by one in the afternoon.

Her grandfather's office sat up off of the floor of the huge building, attached to the roof of the place, and his equally huge windows on three sides looked out over the whole place. Every time she looked back at the office he was looking down over the place and, it seemed, over her. At first, Rachael thought it was sweet, her grandfather had never been anything but affectionate toward her. Then, as the time passed and she noticed him staring more and more, she began to realize that there might be a similarity between her father and her grandfather that she didn't care to find out about.

She finished her sweeping at just before noon. Lunch was from noon until 12:30. She ate like a horse and went to find out what was next in store for her.

The stairs, there were a thousand it seemed, went up and up and all the while she remembered the times she'd spent with her grandparents over the years. Christmases past and a one week visit when she was about 6. She liked her grandparents but there was some underlying reasons for not having them around more often. Rachael wasn't aware of them but could feel them during the rare times they were around. Specifically, when her grandfather was around. He was always smiling at her. Rachael had always thought of it as genuine affection or just that her Grandfather loved her and didn't see her very much. As for his wife, well, Rachael's real grandmother had been dead since the year after she'd been born.

Rachael looked at the door, the stencil on it which said, "VINCENT J. YORK, OWNER," and smiled. That was her grandfather and along with the people from the night before it made her feel important. She knocked and a moment later heard a soft: "Come in."

She walked in and her grandfather smiled. Rachael smiled back. All smiles. He threw an envelope at her. It hit her in the chest and fell to the floor. She looked down at it and her smile faltered. It was fat, paper clipped shut, and she could see what was in it. Money. Probably a thousand dollars.

He was still smiling. He stroked his finger at her and said: "Come here. Sit on my lap. It's been a long time since you sat on my lap."

In an instant Rachael's expression went from confusion to disgust. She was old enough to read people, a skill she had honed by watching her mother and father, and knew where the situation was headed.

"No Grandpa, I'd rather not."

He looked surprised.

"Why not?"

He paused for effect and looked down at her feet and the envelope.

"There's a thousand dollars in there. Actually, fifteen hundred. Hell, I am your Grandpa after all." He smiled again.

Rachael had seen the same smile on her father's face when he sat on the edge of her bed so long ago. She bent down and picked up the envelope, feeling the heft of it, the weight of all the money in there. For a moment she considered going to him. It was a lot of money and he should be thanked for it. Then, the smile occurred to her again. The similarities of her father and her mother's father.

"Come on, sit on my lap."

"Is this money mine, Grandpa? No matter what?" Rachael said, pointing the envelope at her grandfather.

"Of course. Now come here. Come on." Still smiling.

Rachael shook her head. She walked to his desk and sat on the corner.

He gave her an Oh-come-on-now-don't-you-trust-me sort of look and Rachael looked him dead in the face, in the eyes. His smile disappeared and he actually flushed a bit. Neither of them said a word. For a moment he fidgeted under her gaze and she bored a hole in him with an invisible drill mounted in her eyes.

"Maybe, uh, you should go home. I don't think this job is for you honey."

"I think you're right, Grandpa."

Rachael was on a plane later that night. She was back in Klamath Falls the next day. She started work for Mr. Graham the next week but only stayed for a week, due to the conclusion of the final chapter of life with her father.

It seemed that her father had been, to use proper military lingo, misusing government funds and/or property for just over 20 years, his entire career. Since spending was tight with the Vietnam conflict going on and eating up so much government money, there was always someone looking for a scapegoat. In her father's case the man in question was guilty as sin and wasn't anything remotely like a scapegoat. He was busted down to an E-1, an entry level enlisted rate, discharged from the Air Force, and sentenced to 75 years in Leavenworth.

He had been selling government drugs, clothing, supplies, pens, anything he could, to anyone he could for the last two decades, and for the year prior he'd been selling to an Air Force Intelligence agent, unbeknownst to him.

Sitting at home, watched by an unmarked, government white vehicle outside his house, with his wife, he seethed. His two boys were gone, one to die in a matter of months in Vietnam and one just under two years away from prison. He was left with only his daughter. The only person in the world he hated more than his drunk wife. His wife was passed out in a booze induced stupor in the living room and Rachael was still in bed. He knew he was going to prison for the rest of his life and so did his daughter. It couldn't hurt to make sure she didn't have anything to gloat about when he was gone. Hell, he'd make sure she'd never gloat again.

He went to the closet just inside the back door of the house. It was where all the camping gear, clothes pins, Christmas decorations, and other shit paid for with stolen government money sat. Behind it all in a shoe box were two long forgotten revolvers.

The shells were in plastic bags. A feeble attempt to keep them

from failing if they should ever need to be used. He filled the six chambers of one of the revolvers. He threw the bag back into the box and put the top back on.

He cocked back the thumb latch and walked to Rachael's room.

He opened her door slowly and looked at her rolled up in the comforter she'd gotten for her birthday from her aunt. It pissed him off just to look at her. The door squeaked and made a solid THUNK as he pushed it open and it hit the wall beside it. Rachael stirred. He raised the gun up in front of him, holding it with both hands, grinning like a loon.

Rachael rolled over and half opened her eyes, thinking she was dreaming. She sat straight up. As she did, he fired.

The first shot missed, because as he fired Rachael sat up. It had been a reflexive reaction. Rachael knew her father hated her, she felt the same way, but she hadn't expected him to awaken her by pointing a gun at her from across the room. The slug blew a hole in the sheet rock behind her, leaving a small cloud of plaster to float through the air. After taking careful aim once more, Rachael's father cocked back hammer, again.

Wide eyed and horrified, she pleaded, "PLEASE, don't."

In the living room, her mother stirred from her Vodka induced slumber. The two MP's who had been in the car outside waiting for the word to bring James Clark in were pounding on the door.

He shut the door behind him and set his back against it. For a moment, he looked confused, just staring at Rachael, the gun pointed at her. A smile lit up his face.

"Well, I guess you didn't believe me. I told you I was going to kill you," he said, stepping toward Rachael, "but first, I think we've got one last thing to settle."

He put the gun out in front of him and stuck it against Rachael's forehead. With his free hand he reached down and unzipped his pants. He pulled his penis out and stepped toward his daughter.

"Suck it," he said.

Rachael was sure that her father was insane. The instant he fired the gun for the first time she was sure of it. Now, as he stood with his penis in her face and a gun to her forehead, she couldn't decide whether to laugh or to cry. She wanted to tell him to go to hell, to fuck off, to punch him in the face, or use the gun on him but none of it mattered at that moment. Right then, she only had two choices, do it or don't do it.

She took door number two.

"No."

"Suck it or Daddy is going to kill you, Rachael."

There was a noise from the living room. Wood breaking. Heavy footsteps.

"Fuck off . . . daddy," Rachael said with a smile. Somehow, dying seemed an easier way than what he was proposing.

Her father took a breath, stood up straight, and took a small step back. He was going to shoot. Right then and there. Rachael knew it. The index finger of his hand began to tighten on the trigger. Then there was pounding on the door.

Rachael looked at the door. It was shaking with the force of the pounding. Her father had locked it and she hadn't even noticed. She had thought the key was lost. He turned away from her, lost in thought, trying to determine what to do next. Rachael slowly but deliberately began to slide off the opposite side of the bed away from her father.

He turned toward her after looking at the door for a moment longer.

"No. You're not getting away. I'm going to kill you. Right now."

Rachael fell back into the corner and looked at her father. They were only twelve feet apart, tops. There was no way he would miss this time.

Her father pulled the trigger, and the gun blew up in his hand. One of the pieces of the shattered gun went through his eye into the frontal lobe of his brain, giving him a messy but thorough lobotomy. He was dead before he hit the ground.

The MP's had the police and base officials there in a matter of minutes, questioning Rachael and her mother. Rachael's final memory of her father would be a picture in her mind, him holding a gun, grinning from ear to ear, trying to kill her. It was the only time in her life she'd ever seen him look really happy.

Things were laid back, comparatively, from there on out. School went fine, her gifts in almost all of her subjects coming to light. She wasn't a genius by any means, but was good at just about everything. In fact, she thought that she'd be a fairly good teacher. She knew as least as much as any of them. It was true, and she would, in time.

High school was a time of opening up for her, experimenting, finding out things about herself, others around her. She turned out to be very attractive. Tall, muscular for a woman, due to her years spent working for Mr. Graham, she was a sort of earthy beauty. Cosmetics and faddish clothes didn't become her and she stayed with the subtle, introspective personality she had and it drew people to her, although none got close.

Good grades, a stint in choir, and a couple of very minor boy-friends got her through her time at Henley High School with minimal stress. A remarkable feat for any teenager.

At the age of 18, her head as straight as it could be considering her past, she headed off to college in Ashland, Oregon, with two dead brothers, a man she'd once called father buried 6 feet under where he belonged, and an alcoholic mother moving to the biggest city in the state, Portland, with the money from the death of her eldest son.

That was where she had met John Vondralin. Her first week there, a program set up to get freshmen accustomed to the campus called 'One Week Early,' was spent in a tornado of tours, lectures, trips and introductions to everyone from the student body President to the President of the college itself. John was two years older than her and had started college at the age of seventeen. He was in his senior year and getting free room and board for the first two weeks of the school year, plus a choice of rooms on campus for his

volunteer work as an one week early or 'O.W.E.' instructor. John was due to attend the University of Oregon to study law as a graduate the next year and was in for a year slacking off when it came to classes. He was also the instructor for Rachael's group of freshmen.

From the first time she saw him she was attracted to him physically, although she pushed that impulse to the back of her mind as she always did with such impulses, they tended to remind her of her father. However, he was also intelligent AND quiet, reserved as he could be, but still a fairly social person it seemed. He was everything she wanted her personality to be, noticeable but subtle, witty but not offensive, and most of all, genuinely close to people. He acted as if he really cared about those people he had around him and if he didn't, he was a damn good actor.

She responded to him in short sentences when he addressed her. When they played the little 'get to know each other' games, she played her part, but her answers were always vague, shallow responses that could have easily come from a textbook. It was obvious to those around her, including John, that she wasn't a very open person, not necessarily out of desire, but for some other, unknown, reason.

At weeks end, halfway through September of 1976, she was well accustomed to the layout of the campus, she knew the names of all the halls, where all of her classes were to be, what dorms were for men and which one housed the women. John had done a fantastic job of helping all of the people in his group to feel comfortable in their new surroundings, all of them had opened up and had made at least one acquaintance with the possibility of evolving into a friendship. He belonged in some movie with a happy ending. Through the eyes of those around him, he was perfect in every sense. He was given the 'Best Instructor' award for the time in O.W.E. accepting it graciously, yet humbly.

Rachael was sure at that point that her social life for the rest of the year and for the rest of her time at Southern Oregon College had been exhausted. Her life after a week at Southern Oregon College was a washout, at least socially. She prayed that it wasn't

going to turn out like she thought it was, otherwise it was going to be a long four years until she got her sheepskin. She had visions of lots of open minded people who would draw her out of her shell and engage her in intelligent conversation, who would get her to tell them about her past. Rachael would be able to open up and tell them how hurt she had been and maybe for the first time in her life she could feel close to someone. Maybe, she would find someone, a man, who she felt comfortable enough around, to talk to. She would be able to finish college, get her teaching certificate, get married, teach, have kids, do the whole thing. At that point though, at the end of 'One Week Early,' it seemed to all be over.

Her first week gave her a taste of the difficulty of college classes and it was hard not to laugh at all of the hype she'd heard before arriving. The classes were, no exaggeration, a joke. Ten times easier than high school with a lot more leniency when it came to assignments, attendance, and attention. It wasn't easy to understand why more people didn't wind up in college, it was easier than working, although she was doing that too.

Her job, in the physical education building, was cleaning the bathrooms, the halls, and whatever else needed done at 5 in the morning until 8, Monday through Friday. It wasn't a lot of money, but it allowed her some sort of spending cash, not that she had anywhere to spend it.

The third week of classes, after her Intro to Psych class, she saw John again, not just in passing, instead up close and personal.

She came out of class headed toward Suzanne Homes, her dorm, and almost ran into him. He stood there, looking down at her, grinning. She couldn't stop herself from smiling, his was contagious. He spoke, his deep voice solid but soft.

"Sorry. Almost knocked you over."

"It's okay, I'm not in a hurry or . . . I mean I . . . I don't have a class for another hour anyway," Rachael stuttered, trying to find something to say, quickly. She wanted John to like her, even though she couldn't figure it out for herself.

He nodded as if he knew. Turned out he did.

"Yeah, I know. I've kind of been following you around for the past week or so."

She was immediately defensive.

"WHAT? You've been following me?"

He hung his head in mock shame, looking at her with pitiful eyes. Her smile which had died upon his confession of following her, was resurrected without her permission.

"Two apologies from me in less than a minute. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you angry. I just wanted to see if you were doing alright. Haven't seen you since classes started, and—"

"Do you follow all of the people you worked with at OWE?"

He shook his head slowly.

"You get right to the point don't you?" he asked directly.

"Only when I feel threatened," her smile shrank an almost imperceptible amount.

"Don't feel threatened. I couldn't hurt anyone, except maybe myself. Listen, if I'm bothering you, I'll leave you alone. I just—"

"No! I'm . . . I'm just not too good with people."

"Well, we can fix that."

She looked at him, dead in the eyes, like she had with her grandfather years earlier, and didn't speak. He didn't wither at her gaze, but did seem just a little confused.

"Why ARE you talking to me?" Rachael queried, "I'm a freshman. Not to mention, your a pretty big guy around here, so what's the catch?"

"Damn! No beating around the bush with you," he fidgeted for a second, it was the first time she suspected him of being nervous, "Well, I've got to play chaperon at the freshman dance Friday, and since you are a freshman, and I don't have anyone else I'd particularly like to go with, I thought we could go together. Maybe even have something to eat before."

Again she gave him the stare. Again he seemed uncomfortable but didn't look away.

"That's it? Nothing else? Just the dance?"

"Yeah? What else would there be?"

The look, again.

"Would you STOP looking at me like that!?! I feel like a 5 year old! You look at me like I'm trying to steal your marbles or something!"

She laughed when he said it, he joined in. It evolved from a slight laugh to fits of laughter, wailing laughter, from the both of them. It was the first time in her life she could remember laughing without having to worry about who heard it, or what would happen, not to mention feeling comfortable enough to do so.

The dance, as always, was packed with nearly two hundred freshman and perhaps another hundred other people from upper classes. It was nice, as dinner had been at Theo's before hand. John was nothing if not a gentleman. He was funny, kind, and interested in what she said. Nothing in his speech, looks, or movements indicated any hidden motives, although she was constantly looking. The night went quicker than she would have liked and he walked her to her dorm, her roommate leaving the room as she came up the stairs.

He stopped at the top of the stairs and she walked about another ten feet before she realized it. She turned to look at him.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, this is just an all women's floor and if the 'Residence Assistant' were to catch me up there I'd wind up in some deep fecal matter. Probably better if I just call it a night right here. Don't want my degree to wind up in the crapper at the beginning of my senior year."

She smiled. He grinned and nodded at her.

"I'll see you around campus. If you want to find me I'm in Aspen Hall, room 21," he looked at his shoes for a moment, for some reason it made her blush, "I had a nice time."

"Me too."

He walked away with a wave and a spin on the balls of his feet. She was glad he didn't try to do anything else. She wasn't ready to have anyone touching her. She wasn't sure if she ever would be.

CHAPTER 6

The next week they went out again. Then again. Then twice the week after that. Soon, it was every other day. Then, if they didn't see each other every day it was a rare occasion. By the end of the school year in June they were definitely together, a couple for lack of a better term. He had only tried to kiss her once, about two months after they'd started seeing each other regularly, it had wound up being a kiss on the cheek. He settled for an occasional hug and a hand hold. It certainly wasn't easy for him, that much was obvious to Rachael. His hormones were in full swing, he wasn't led entirely by his lower regions, but they tended to get involved now and then.

So, when it seemingly came to an end in June of 1977, signifying, at least in her mind, the conclusion of the only fruitful, worthwhile relationship she'd ever managed to have with a man, she was more than a little upset. He'd restored her faith to a degree in people, in MEN, and she was afraid that she'd never see him again once he left. As he moved his things out of his dorm room in Aspen, into his car, to take to Portland where he'd landed a summer job, they talked, SHE talked, taking trips to the car with boxes all the while.

"You're not coming back, are you John?"

"Of course not, I'm done here."

Rachael stutter stepped, it stunned her, his frankness, she assumed that he meant with her as well.

"You're going to U of O and that's it, huh?" She asked, wanting to make sure she understood.

"Yep."

"You're working at P.G.E. for the summer?"

"Yes. I've told you all this stuff before, Rach. What's the deal with rehashing it all? Is there a problem?"

She was silent. She thought about it for a moment. There wasn't anything to MAKE him feel connected to her. He didn't need to feel guilty if he was just cutting things off with her but she had assumed he would, he was that kind of person, or so she'd thought.

She hadn't given him anything to hold onto really, not a commitment, not a kiss, not a word. She'd pushed him away every time he'd even tried to step things up between the two of them. He'd always been understanding, seeming to know there was something there, some reason for waiting. Maybe he'd just assumed that if he waited long enough, if he was patient, that she'd crumble, give into his wants and desires. Maybe, but she didn't think so, didn't WANT to think so.

She set the box down, the one she'd just picked up, and waited for John to come back into the room.

He came in, saw her standing in a corner of his room, her arms folded across her chest, looking at him with . . . with THE look. He knew it well. It meant she was pissed, something was wrong, SOMETHING. When she finally spoke it was in a torrent, a FLOOD, an outpouring of emotion and exposure of her feelings, her soul. She had misunderstood his actions, but her reaction couldn't have been more appropriate. He was immeasurably thankful, knowing for sure that she finally cared about him.

"John, I'm sorry if I didn't give you a reason to want to stay with me and I know that you're going to U of O and that you're only going to be a couple hours away, close to five while you're away in Portland for the summer, and I just want you to know that I wasn't pushing you away from me just to be mean. I just have a lot of things to deal with on my own, things from my past and from, well, from my family and all kinds of stuff, and I don't want you to think that I don't appreciate you, it's just that I, uh, I didn't think I'd feel comfortable around a man ever again, but now I do and I don't think I want you to go away, and I'm afraid you

will or, uh, you are because I didn't give you a reason to stay or, I mean, a reason to stay with me, it's just that I can't and, I, uh," her tears were hovering on the edge of her eyes, like suicides eyeing the ledge before jumping, "I don't want you to go," she stopped abruptly, knowing that if she said more, not only would it make LESS sense, but it would make her cry and if he didn't care, if he was leaving her, then she didn't want him to have the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

He crossed his room, to her, in a leap. He put his hands on her shoulders and for a moment she thought he was going to kiss her, which made her uncomfortable, although for the first time she thought she would have let him, and he squeezed them tight, not moving in on her, or trying anything, but speaking in his deep voice, so soothing, so honest. The only one that had ever spoken truth to her always, spoken kindly and had understood. His expression was of concern, earnest and kind.

"Rachael. I'm sorry you didn't understand me. I'm going away to school in Eugene, to the University of Oregon, I am not coming back here to Ashland to go to school. I'm finished with that. BUT, I am coming back here to be with you, as often as I can anyway. Law isn't an easy subject, but I'm going to come back for you. I, uh," he started to fidget, his eyes broke contact with hers and he looked at his shoes like he had the night of the first dance she'd been to at Southern Oregon, "I think I, whew, uh, aw hell, I think I love you."

She didn't move. She looked at his feet. They seemed as interesting to her as they had to him moments before. She couldn't seem to look up. So, there they stood, both of them looking at his feet, his hands grasping her shoulders, hair mingling, neither with the nerve or self confidence to look the other in the eyes.

He let go of her shoulders and turned away from her, never looking up. He bent to pick up a box, raised it and walked out of the room. She continued to look at the ground where his feet had been. Small dark spots appeared on the rough, thin carpet below her head.

He came back in. Looking up, seeing her head hung, face in her hands, softly sobbing. He was suddenly sure he'd done something to hurt her, to destroy the bond between them that had taken months to build. He walked back to stand in the spot he'd been at moments before.

"Rachael, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you cry. I just—"

She threw her arms around him squeezing him in a bear hug and sobbed, crying until she fell asleep in his arms.

They had stayed together through her years at Southern and his at U of O, and were married not two weeks after his graduation. The beginning wasn't easy. Buying a house, John spending endless hours away as an associate, Rachael spending much of her extra time working with the kids that she was teaching. However, the two of them found work remarkably easy. They were usually exhausted and had little time to spend together but they weren't unhappy. Then, when Rachael became pregnant with Charlotte two years later things started to fall together in an entirely different but not uncomfortable manner. Rachael left her teaching job and they began to rely heavily on John's income, which was fortunately growing at a significant rate. Every penny was accounted for and they did everything possible to prepare for Charlottes arrival. She was born on a cloudy day with less than two hours in labor for Rachael. John was rendered speechless by her for what seemed like an eternity. She was a healthy and beautiful baby. It was as close to perfect as the two of them could imagine. The two of them would often talk about how unusual it was for so many things to turn out right for a couple so early in their marriage. Disappointingly, their fortunes took a turn for the worse and things hadn't stayed that way.

The two of them spent nearly ten years in a perfect marriage, bearing a nearly flawless daughter. Ups and downs came and went but never was there any thought of giving up what they had built and were building together. Different colors on and in the house, different clothing sizes for Charlotte, and slight signs of age on their faces. In the space of just over a year it was all a shambles,

back to where it had all started. Cancer took John and ate away the relationship they had built in time that seemed to pass with no more than one cycle of a second hand. Rachael was alone again, with no one to trust.

CHAPTER 7

It was now a matter of trying to figure out who would take Charlotte. It didn't make sense that someone just came and took her in the middle of a snow spell. It was too damn cold, not to mention they didn't live anywhere near a main street, or a place that would be visible to passersby. No, if someone took her, which was what she suspected, the ONLY thing she COULD suspect, then the kidnappers would have had to spend time finding out where she lived. Someone HAD to have seen something.

New Year's Eve day. The neighbors were the next step. She decided to go to each of them individually, again, and get every tiny little detail she could out of them, no matter how insignificant.

25 minutes. A snow covered, empty street. When someone came down it, SOMEONE saw it. She knew, she watched just like the rest of them when a car rolled down their street. If only she hadn't fallen asleep. She wasn't sure she'd ever be able to pick up 'The Stand' again without flinching, wincing.

The first people she went to see were the Deardorffs. They had heard a car honk she remembered. Of course it was an hour and a half before she'd fallen asleep with Charlotte in the front yard, but there could have been something else, something important they could have forgotten or overlooked.

They invited her in graciously, as they always had, and offered her a seat on their tattered old couch. After a moment Mr. Deardorff asked if she wanted some coffee but she declined as graciously as possible. Their house wasn't in the best repair and Mr. Deardorff always seemed to have a couple of cars in various states of disarray in the yard in front of his house. The cars had always annoyed

John, but she always thought it a sort of eccentric addition to the otherwise bland neighborhood.

She cut immediately to the questions at hand, starting by explaining herself . . . sort of.

"You see Mr. and Mrs. Deardorff—" he cut her off.

"I'm Kurt. My wife is Gerta. Go on."

She smiled and did.

"The F.B.I. told me, not in as many words, that they didn't have the manpower to expend on this case that I'd like them to. My daughters disappearance is important, but not THAT important, if you know what I mean."

Mr. Deardorff nodded and shook his head, muttered something about tax dollars not paying for shits and giggles, and then focused himself on Rachael again.

"So, what I'm trying to find out is what you saw the day Charlotte disappeared, it's only been three days so I'm hoping you haven't forgotten anything," she paused, gathering herself, and setting a pad of paper on her leg and clicking her pen. "I guess I'm asking you to tell me anything and everything you can remember of that day from about 10 in the morning until 2 in the afternoon, not to mention anything odd for the past couple weeks or even MONTHS."

Mr. Deardorff looked at her for a moment like he was sizing her up. Her face began to take on THE look and she forced it away. The man in front of her had no hidden motives, she was sure of it, he was too old and spent too much time under the hoods of cars to give her a second look. He was into nude calendar pin-ups holding tools, she was willing to wager. Mrs. Deardorff sat quietly. She had never heard the woman speak. Mr. Deardorff kept the same look on his face but looked away. At the wall. At the floor.

"Uh, let's see . . ."

And so it went. The old man recited the details of his day, three days earlier, everything from the shit he took when he woke up, until the minute he heard her start screaming from her front yard. The only things out of the ordinary were the car that drove

by and honked in front of an empty house and the stray dog in their back yard. The dog was only out of the ordinary because it was so damn cold out. The car honking at an empty house did seem important though, although WHY she didn't know, but she wrote down everything just the same.

When all was said and done and she had thanked the two of them for their help, she stood to go. She went to their front door, opened it up, pushed the creaky screen door open and stepped one foot out onto the steps. She looked back into the house. Mr. Deardorff was headed down the hall, presumably to relieve his bowels which he had described as 'regular as junk mail,' and she asked Mrs. Deardorff one question. She wasn't sure if she asked it just to hear her speak or because she thought she might have seen something.

"Why do you think the car honked at the empty house, Mrs.—Gerta?"

The quiet old woman smiled, her teeth yellowed by thousands of cigarettes, and spoke as if the answer to the question was obvious to everyone.

"The housesitter I suppose. Must have been lookin' for im'."

She nodded, half waved at the woman, stepped out of the house and closed the door behind her.

Housesitter. Definitely would be a good person to talk to, she HAD to. Of course, her initial reaction was to assume that this was the person who had taken Charlotte but as soon as she met him, two days later, she knew that there wasn't a snowballs chance in hell of such a thing.

Next, after a trip to the Green's with no answer, was Mr. Wright.

Mr. Wright was an OLD man. Mr. Deardorff was just on top of 60 but she was sure Mr. Wright was fast approaching 100, if not 110. He had more wrinkles than a 10 year old phone book and flesh hung off his rail thin body like it was a nuisance.

He was a happy, immaculate fellow, with a full head of hair, well pressed clean clothes, and a house that held the aroma of just baked bread. He'd lost his spouse three years prior, in that she and Mr. Wright were kindred spirits.

Mr. Wright spoke in a voice filled with experience and tinted with sarcasm.

"I remember the first time I met you. I thought right off that you looked like that girl in the talkies. The one whose name is Hay-something. Aw, I can't remember. She sure was pretty though. You look a lot like her, very pretty," with a touch of embarrassment his eyes lowered toward his shoes. A very endearing quality in her eyes.

"Thank you, sir. I'd I—"

"I'm not a sir. I use to work for a livin' missy. My name is Theodore. Or Theo if you like."

"Yes, uh, Theo," she wondered to herself if everyone over 50 had a problem with being referred to with respectful titles of 'sir,' or 'Mrs.'. Maybe, they liked to hear it first and then play it off. Fake modesty, for some, but not this man. He reminded her of John, not that John would ever be old, or age another day.

"You'd like to what?"

"Excuse me?"

"You said, 'Thank you, sir. I'd I—,' so, what would you 'I—?'," he said with a sly grin, showing a beautiful smile.

She felt like a kid. She looked down at the white pad on her lap and then back up at him.

"I'd like to find out what you saw the other day."

"THREE days ago, you mean."

"Yes."

"When your little girl kind of disappeared, eh?"

"Yes. That day."

"Well, let's see. I woke up little before six, can't sleep too well anymore. Horrible stomach pain, eats away at me. I always feel hungry when I'm not. So, that morning I had me some scrapple and eggs. Then, then, I," he paused, looked up, obviously scanning his memory for what he did next, she had a feeling he remembered just about everything, except the name of the actress she looked like, "I wrote a letter to one of my cousins in, uh, Iowa, Manchester to be exact. She's a peach, you know one time, she and I—"

Rachael looked at him, with eyes that asked nicely to stick to the point at hand. No reproach, only a silent sort of begging that made the man speechless for a moment.

"Well, I'll save that for another time. I wrote that letter about, oh, 10:30 or so, and remember looking outside the window there." He pointed to his front window facing the street, "and seeing some lady driving up the street like a bat out of hell. Must a been doing 35 miles an hour. Not an easy feat in weather like this, all the snow about and all. She didn't stop or nothing though, nothing to be alarmed over. Well, between then and about 11:00, give or take ten minutes, I listened to some of my phonograph albums. Was prancing around here like a loon, just a singing and dancing. Good for a man my age. Need to exercise the doctor says. Least that's what I always see on the television."

Rachael smiled, it was an odd picture in her head, trying to imagine the old man dancing around his living room to whatever sort of music he did. Then, Charlotte dancing around singing Christmas carols popped into her head like a picture and her smile faded. Theo saw her expression and guessed what it was from, he spoke again.

"I know you want to hear what I seen three days past, dear, but I think you should listen to something I have to say. Alright?"

She didn't think he was wasting her time, he seemed to genuinely want to tell her something, something he thought was important. She nodded.

"Alright. When I lost Alice three years ago, I was devastated. Didn't think I could live without her. It took me a year before I could get on through a day regular, not fussing and crying over her. Imagine this old man crying, huh? Well, I got to thinking about a lot of things. My son was one of them. You see I had only one child, my wife and I couldn't seem to get no more to come about. His name was Thomas. Thomas Brandon Wright.

We loved that boy, he was a good kid, did well in his academics, joined the Navy, won all kinds of medals, and died along with all them other boys in Pearl Harbor. We mourned him so. It was

like all of the reason for living was gone from our lives. We'd spent so long looking after him, teaching him to read, to eat, to pee for God's sake! And then, in a day, he was gone. Like a word in the sand washed away by the waves, there one minute, gone the next. BUT we got on. We weren't the same people, we didn't love quite the same or FEEL the same, but we got on. For a long time he was always in my thoughts, like a light in a dark room, and when Alice died, I remembered him, REALLY remembered him for the first time in a long time. I loved him but he was gone; Didn't mean I did a bad job or he loved me less, just meant I had to love his memory and not HIM," he looked her square in the face and for the first time since the last time her father had intimidated her with his crushing grip and icy stare she was intimidated by a man's stare, "I want you to be prepared for the possibility that your little Charlotte may not be coming back and be ready to get on with living if she doesn't."

She felt as if she should be mad at the man but all she could do was nod. Like it or not, he was right. No amount of determination or questioning of people that were around when Charlotte disappeared was going to guarantee she wasn't lying dead in a ditch somewhere.

"Now, I'll get on with what I did three days back, the day your daughter came up missing."

She looked at the man, her face long, close to tears.

"Thank you."

"Anytime honey, anytime." A kind pause, "So, 11:00, give or take ten minutes. I, uh, finished my prancing around and picked up a book by this fellow named Ludlum. A mystery book, about a guy named 'Bourne,' and got pretty good into it, till' about say noon, when I heard this honking outside. So, I carry my skinny butt out of this chair, over to the window, and see some man letting himself into the Green's house. He's got a key so I figure it's okay, and the car honks when it leaves. Got a good look at it though. One of those huge cars, looks like a boat. Called a Gran Torino or an El Dorado or something like that. Anyway, this big car drops

this man off and that was the hoopla about the honking horn. For the next hour, maybe hour and a half, after that I didn't do much besides watch the snow fall in swirls, off and on. I remember looking across the street at one point and seeing one of the Roland's in their window. Just sitting there, watching the world go by. Never moved, just sat there, and I began to wonder if the fellow could move. About 1:30 or so I got up and made myself some lunch and then I heard you hollering while I was in the middle of sautéing onions. I did notice that whichever one of the Roland's had been watching the street had stopped by the time you started hollering," Rachael wrote so fast that wisps of smoke seemed to rise from the page, "and then I was helping you as best as I could, considering I'm not very fast, looking for your daughter."

"That's it then. Nothing else?," she asked. Hoping since the man seemed to be old enough to know everything, that he did.

"Nope. Nothing else that I can think of, darling lady. I am truly sorry but this is one thing I can't talk my way out of, or yours for that matter." Theo smiled a tired grin, one that showed his age for the first time since she'd known him, it wasn't flattering.

She stood, in a hurry to get on with her plan of attack, in order to do what she could to find Charlotte.

"MR. WRIGHT, thank you for your help. If you ever need a patient ear or hot meal you come over to the house, alright?"

"It's a deal, ma'am."

He walked her to the door, patted her on the back as she left, and waved as she walked across the street to the Roland's house.

She figured out the real reason she liked him so much in a fleeting thought as she trudged across the snow covered street, making crunching noises in her thick leather boots. He was the warm sort of man she had always wished for as a father.

CHAPTER 8

Far from home, SO far. Charlotte knew little else. A space the size of her closet at home had become her home. Tears were useless, she found that out after she'd been put in . . . in . . . her cage for hours. She had screamed and cried and hated and scraped at the walls and door with no handle on her side, trying to find a way out, a way *home*. Even at only eight years old she knew what kind of situation she was in. She could, she knew, very easily wind up sleeping with the same angels that her daddy was with. Somehow, she didn't like that idea too much. She wanted to see her daddy, but not *that* bad.

She was fed from a hole in the ceiling, a stainless steel half-bucket lowered down from above. It was always soup, stew, or something like that. Nothing that needed a fork or a knife. The food didn't come from too far above, however, because she could just make out the face of the man lowering it down to her when he did. She had a feeling that he was just a floor above her, almost all of the time, listening, and waiting for something. He had let her out only once in her three days and counting. The door had opened and all the light outside had disappeared. Even when her eyes adjusted to the dark there was barely enough light to see her hand in front of her face. She wasn't sure if she was actually *seeing* it or just imagining it, it was that dark. So she had staggered around in the dark, trying to find a light switch, a stick, a poker for the fire, ANYTHING to help her get out of the situation she was in. After what seemed like eternity hands had grabbed her from behind as the lights had come on and she peed in her pants. A hand was over her eyes before she could see anything, except a bunch of doors.

Her kidnapper, whoever he was, was only a shadowy face to her.

A face which had taken her away from her life, and perhaps intended to take her life away from her. But, she was a fighter, like her mother, and wouldn't let the man do anything to her if she could help it. Anything more than he already had, that is.

She'd been standing in the yard, trying to figure out a way to move the huge snowball she'd made into the backyard. It was heavy and she couldn't push it anymore. She neglected to think of bringing the smaller ball out from the backyard to put on top of the bigger one. She'd thought of it though, during her long ride in the trunk of the car she'd come to this place in.

He'd come out of nowhere. His car an old one, white, pointy on the back end. It was kind of dusty, dirty, and blended in with the snow. Even the tires had white circles on them. The man inside was wearing a scarf over the bottom half of his face and a stocking cap over most of the top half. All she'd seen clearly of him was his eyes. They were a bluish gray, sort of like metal, and didn't seem to be like normal eyes. In fact, she'd never seen any like them before. His puffs of breath in the frigid air had seemed funny to her and she had smiled. She'd watched his face as the corners of his eyes wrinkled up, smiling.

He only took one step, not even a full one, putting his foot on the ground outside his car. He called to her, without menace, his voice soothing, remarkably like her father's.

"Excuse me, honey, I don't know my way around here, could you tell me how to get to, uh," he'd looked down at a piece of paper he was holding, "Fremont street?"

She wasn't supposed to talk to strangers. They were *always* saying that at school. Still, it wasn't like she was taking candy from him or getting in his car.

"Yeah. You just go to the end of the street here, a—"

He put one hand to the side of his head, about where his left ear would have been, and spoke again.

"What? I'm hard of hearing, dear. You'll have to come closer."

For a moment, one she didn't understand the meaning of, her stomach tingled and seemed to drop lower into her body, she felt

queasy and nauseous. Instinct was warning her to stay away from the car and the man. She didn't understand it and therefore didn't pay attention to it, and after a moments hesitation, crossed the invisible threshold of the zone which led to 'THE STREET' which was forbidden, not to be played in.

Four steps and she was to the curb.

She heard a POOF sort of noise and felt a prick in her chest. She looked down, and saw a pinkish looking flower stuck to her coat. She smiled, it was pretty, there had been a pinch but it was gone so fast . . .

And then, after only a few seconds, everything got blurry. She tried to yell for her mother but all that left her mouth was a garbled mess. She felt the sensation of being lifted and the last thing she'd seen was the passenger side of the seat the man was sitting on.

She'd woken up in the trunk of the car which had been lined with some sort of stuffing. All of her kicking and yelling didn't make a difference to him it seemed, or to anyone on the outside for that matter. Crying didn't help and she had a feeling that holding her breath until she turned blue wouldn't win her any points. It never did with mom, although she'd only tried it twice.

It was weird. The whole thing, talking and all had only taken about a minute. It seemed like that minute might have mattered a lot more than she understood. She'd never build another snowman as long as she lived as long as she could go home.

The slot in the ceiling opened. The half-bucket came down, descending slowly. She looked up at her captor. He was grinning, a drop of drool gleaming on his lower lip. His long hair obscured most of his face. He pushed it back on the left side, where his ear *should have* been. It hooked behind a misshapen lump of flesh, that looked to be the remnants of an ear involuntarily TORN off. Still, he smiled. The half-bucket touched the floor. He pointed at the food. As she had before, she took the food and water, both in plastic bowls, without utensils, and set them on the floor beside her. He reeled the half-bucket back up. He'd come back for the bowls later. He had before. She was pretty sure he would again.

As the slot above her slid closed, she heard him speak, his voice gravelly like Dr. McCoy on the television, it had seemed so smooth before. He seemed to be talking to himself, at least that's what she figured.

"I wonder how long it'll take? Will she lose her mind? Will I get tired of her? Will someone try to find me?," he stopped, she heard him giggle, "Will I eat DINNER? YES! That's for sure!"

On television, people that acted like him were called 'insane.' She preferred the term she'd heard her mother use in reference to some guy who killed somebody, who was on the news. He was a 'psycho.'

Charlotte wasn't really scared, yet. She was homesick, cramped up, and confused but the man hadn't done anything to her. It hadn't occurred to her yet that her mom wasn't just going to come along and get her and get mad at the guy who took her. She didn't understand that her life was truly in danger. However, even as young as she was, she would figure it out. Sooner than she might have liked.

CHAPTER 9

Unbeknownst to her, she had been driven nearly 1500 miles away from her home, to a place secluded from and out of earshot of any other people besides herself and her captor. Dry, dusty land surrounded her, hills of rock and tumbleweed all around. The highway was just over 10 miles away, the nearest town, 6 miles. She wouldn't have been able to get away even if she got out of her closet. Her mother was nowhere near.

The trunk she'd made her trip in was lined with wool stuffing, encased in and under parts of a tarp, riveted to the metal of the car, on the top, sides, and bottom of it. The noises she had made were like the tickings of a cooling engine, not loud enough to have attention paid to them. Her air had come through tubes that ran under the back seat of the car into the trunk, under the stuffing below her. The man driving the car, also her captor, was an inventor of sorts, and had fans and temperature adjusters for the trunk to be sure anyone in it would be comfortable. A good idea for drive-in movies, but not particularly good for someone wanting to make a little noise.

Robert, the name of the man responsible for the fracture of the lives of Rachael and Charlotte Vondralin, was not an amateur at the little game he was playing. In fact, he was far past the teens in the number of times he'd played such a game. It was different for him every time, always pleasurable. This time he thought it could turn out to be the best yet. Maybe he'd let the girl choose a door. OR maybe, something else would come to mind. Something, always did.

He'd been watching Charlotte for over a month when he took her, finally deciding and taking action on the cold day of December

that he did. The choice of Portland was random. A finger pointing to a spot on a map. The rest was just directions and planning. His binoculars had shown him the inside of the little girl's house, the sleeping mother, the lack of anyone else watching.

The dart gun, tranquilizer dart full, took her out in record time. He had expected a little noise, perhaps a few steps before he could get her into the car. Instead she'd fallen right into his arms and he'd pulled off at a rest area and locked her in his specially enhanced trunk.

He'd seen her, 'IT', for the first time as she left her school. He always took them from the schools. Grade School, High School, College, male, female. For some reason they seemed to be easier to take and investigated less. He didn't want the *authorities* to catch on to his little game. That would be . . . bad.

Besides, twice before he'd gotten the extra, ADDED bonus of a person involved in the situation coming after him. Once it had been an Aunt. The other time a Father. They had turned out to be the most interesting games of all. Of course, he had led them along. Making sure all the while that the police weren't involved. It was easy to do.

Leave food with the them in the closet, lots of it. And water. Spend a day leaving little hints. A note on the seat of the car that would mean something to them but nothing to the authorities.

Perhaps a picture of a ranch in . . . in another state. Directions to a resort. A phone booth number, time to call, and if they weren't punctual . . . well, they tended to get caught up in the chase and neglect to call the police. Only one other had tried to find him and after a little tug on the hook, he'd gone to the police. It had sealed the fate of his little 'it' who was found a block from his house a week later. No leads came from the body. It was, lacking better terms, in bad shape.

He'd even ask around about the ones he singled out. The one he decided would be the pawn in the game. He'd asked the little ones about the one in the closet now. About the Mother. The Father. The Aunts and others. He knew about THIS one. He knew

all about her. He had a feeling the Mother would come looking for him. It made him all gooey inside. And a little bit gooey outside too, in the lower regions of his body.

The Mother was called 'Rachael' and the Father was dead. There was no Aunt or anyone else for that matter. It was the Mother and the 'it,' no one else.

It was that fact that made him think Rachael, 'the Mother,' would come after him. She had nothing else, no one else, to live for. She'd be a fun one for him to play with he thought. Perhaps, if she found him, if she didn't go to the police.

CHAPTER 10

The officer that had initially responded to the call at 38th and Fremont was an Officer Michaels. First name, Wesley. He was sure that he'd seen Rachael Vondralin somewhere before but couldn't place her. She was like a movie clip that was just long enough to remind you of the film, but not long enough to let you remember the its title.

Still, he was concerned. She was a nice woman and there was a familiarity about her. At least he thought so, and as a result he wanted to help her. She was a widow, he knew that much, and as much as he hated to admit it, he wondered to himself whether or not she had been with anyone since. He wasn't fond of the idea of approaching her and telling her that he'd liked her from the moment he first saw her. This was because the first time he'd ever seen her she was in near hysterics on the day of her daughters disappearance.

It had been his intervention which had caused the Portland Police Department to waive their 24 hour rule at first and also, because of his involvement, the F.B.I. had gotten involved so quickly, even though it had turned out to be a largely wasted effort.

He believed her when she told him that she didn't think her daughter had run off. The footprint in the street, alone and symbolic, had seemed out of place to him as well. There weren't many adult footprints in the snow. Snow was fun for kids, hell for adults.

So, he was back to work, thinking about a woman he'd met only once. It was probably a passing thing, nothing to get worked up about. 40 years old and still single, he had a right to a crush now and then, not that it happened too often. His last girlfriend had been gone for months. She said she felt smothered. He gave

too much. He wasn't sure how he managed to do that, but at least he still had a desire to try again.

Yes, he managed to make plenty of time for her, even though he was a cop. Days off were devoted to doing nice things for her, setting up surprise dinners, or trips to the coast. When he got off of work early he'd spend a little time getting himself in order, doing his bills or whatever, but he really enjoyed the time he spent with someone else. It was a real pleasure to hear about someone else's day, what they'd done, how they felt about things. Talking to cops, although he was one, wasn't the most exciting thing in the world.

Wesley just wanted to be able to know that when he came home that there would be someone to smile at. Someone to talk to. He didn't want anything outrageous or spectacular. Just someone to call and tell that he might be late. Or early.

He didn't linger for long at the coffee pot, where he had been as the thoughts of Rachael went through his head, he was a damn hard worker. Several commendations proved it. Wesley worked as hard in a relationship as he did at his job. A life of working hard had started with one summer long past. He felt satisfied when he finished a job or something that he'd been working toward came to fruition. The foundation of that work ethic had come from three horrendously tough months on a local farm in the summer of 1968 and then five tough years in the nearby lumber mill.

Wesley looked up at the ceiling for a moment, trying to recall that summer. Distantly, in the back of his mind, it seemed important but what he wanted to try and recall was the name of the man who ran that farm in Klamath Falls. The job that he'd cleaned up the stables for that girl on. He had been a real slave driver. "What was the name of that guy?," he thought to himself, then, as it came to him in a flash, he answered himself. "Oh yeah. Mr. Graham."

CHAPTER 11

The house was hidden behind a row of tall shrubs. Even in the cold of winter, branches heavy with snow, they were thick enough to partially obscure the view. However, it sat up on a hill on their property, and had a perfect dead on view of the Vondralin's house directly across the street.

The Rolands were not the sort of people to throw a block party during the summer or attended one. The husband and father, a big, hairy man, except on top of his head, worked for Continental Can Company, his wife was a secretary for a dentist not more than three blocks away. They had two children, both girls, who tended to stay out of sight more by their parents doing it seemed. One of them was Charlotte's age, the other a couple of years younger. Charlotte was in the same class as Teresa, the older of the two Roland girls. The thought of Teresa made Rachael nervous, the mere thought of Charlotte's name made her nervous. She was so scared of what might have happened to her, where she might have been.

She walked across the street, up the long path to their front door, and was about to knock when it opened, leaving her hand hanging in midair with nothing to do.

The man, whose name she honestly didn't know, stood just about 6 foot 6, and looked down on her with hard, icy eyes. She only knew him as 'Mr. Roland.' He obviously wanted to conclude whatever business she felt she had with them, on their doorstep.

She looked up at him trying not to let herself feel any sort of bias toward him or his family. She had never spoken a word to any of them, nor they to her, so it was a clean slate. Maybe, the expression he was wearing was one that he always wore. 'Mr. Roland'

didn't speak but seemed to squint his eyes a bit more. No, she had to admit, that was definitely an expression of displeasure, he obviously didn't want her around.

"Mr. Roland, I don't know if you were aware of the fact that my daughter disappeared about—"

"Yeah, I know."

"Well, I was kind of wondering if you or your wife, maybe even your kids," she saw him wince, it took her aback, why would he wince? She continued, "Well, I was wondering if you might have seen anything. Anything at all. I talked to the Deardorffs across the street and Mr. Wright and because you're right across the street from my house, I thought may—"

"I didn't see nothing. Neither did my family. Sorry."

He didn't look sorry.

"Well, could I ask your wife, your kids?"

"You don't believe me?," he asked incredulously.

"No, it's not that, it's just that Mr. Wright said he saw someone looking out—"

"We didn't see nothing. And if that's all you came about we're kind of busy."

He didn't look it.

"Please, Mr. Roland, I—"

He shut the door in her face. Not a slam, just a step back and a slow fade. It pissed her off and made her absolutely sure that he or one of his family had seen something. Not to mention the fact that she was sure SOMETHING ELSE was unusual there as well. It was a gut feeling. She couldn't explain it but she was sure that there was more wrong there than just a secluded, introverted family.

She'd have to come at the thing from another angle. Time was of the essence though, she didn't want to, couldn't, wait. Rachael walked down their path to the street, looking back every few feet, watching the window for any sign of a face, hoping the one that had been there on the day Charlotte had been there would appear. It didn't.

Rachael looked at her watch for the first time since going over to the Deardorffs. It was dark now. She'd been walking around in the dark for nearly two hours and it hadn't even occurred to her. Introductions, coffee, questions, goodbyes and thank yous had taken the time from the morning and moved it into early evening. It was just after 6:00. An endless sea of time had come and gone since Charlotte had disappeared and its movement only continued to slow. It was forever give or take an eternity. If she found whoever took her, she'd . . . she'd . . . , if.

A microwave turkey dinner, three shots of her buddy Jack D., a half gallon of tears, and her New Year's celebration was over.

Rachael dozed off to sleep, her dreams plagued with pictures of her daughter destroyed, maimed, rotting, but worst of all, raped. It was not a restful slumber but fortunately for her when the alcohol took full effect it became a painless one. For about 3 minutes.

She saw her from a distance. Like looking through a long tunnel, an exceptionally long paper towel tube. She was a distant image, like a figure barely discernable even with the magnification of binoculars. She was sure it was her daughter. She ran toward her, her speed only a slow walk although she was putting all of her effort into her movement. She should have been running.

She was in a room, tiny, perhaps a closet, and the door was closing. She knew, somehow she knew, that she had to reach her and the door before it closed. It's latching would signal her daughter's demise, perhaps hers as well. She screamed, only a breathy, wheezing sound escaping her lips, her fists clutching in frustration, fingernails cutting into her flesh in much the same way they had under her father's abuse decades before.

The distance seemed to decrease just enough to let her get a good enough look at the person in the tiny room, to be sure it was Charlotte. She couldn't seem to cut the distance any more. She was moving at a turtle's pace. Perspiring like a horse Rachael pressed on, straining every muscle of her body, every ounce of her being toward the single goal of reaching the doorway in front of her. She began to close the gap but the door seemed to be closing faster,

swinging on squeaky hinges, signaling that she was not moving nearly as fast as she needed to.

Tears began to roll down her face, her legs ached, she was less than three feet from the door but couldn't reach it. It kept moving away! Her outstretched hand grasped for the knob, drops of blood floating lazily down from her torn palms. Only an inch and a half before it closed, she could only see a swatch of her daughter's snowpants.

Her right index finger brushed the knob, a gentle caress, an instinctual plea to the metal and wood of the door to stop its swing. Then, as she heard and felt the door latch, the knob was in her hand, palm slick with her own blood, she wrenched it open with a sob.

And looked down at her daughter.

Her eyes, gray and phlegmy from decay, looked out at her in accusation, convicting her of shameless neglect, while mounds of maggots busied themselves happily in the gaping orifice of her mouth, eating where she had once eaten. Spread eagled in an obscene picture of promiscuity, her body, her feminine body, was ravaged, torn, and blood dried. Flies circling hungrily, waiting to deposit their filthy offspring in her, she was MUTILATED, from the waist down, into some sort of butcher's experiment. A single bluish piece of fabric from her snowsuit was intact on her left leg, as she had seen as the door closed. She wept, holding back her gorge with supreme effort.

She bent down to her, wanting to hold her one final time, kiss her sweet, innocent flesh once more.

And she sprang.

Like a wild animal she leapt onto her mother, flailing wildly with scraping fingers and biting with teeth covered with the remains of maggots. Her smell, her decay, caused Rachael to vomit all over the both of them. She tried to throw her, to remove her from herself, but her undead daughter was far stronger than she had ever been in life. Her blonde hair, knotted, and tangled with blood and rotting flesh seemed to keep her hands from gaining

purchase anywhere on her back to remove her. Rachael was now bleeding in a dozen places and in shock. Her daughter whispered in her ear, with a voice rough and ragged from decay.

"Daddy got a little too rough with me, Mommy. Tore me all to hell. But it felt sooooo good. SOOOO GOOD. SOOOO GOOD!!!," her whisper elevated into an ear shattering scream. Rachael cried out in horror, whimpering like a babe. She clasped her hands to the side of her head, screamed. Screamed. SCREAMED.

She woke up with a start. Her hands covered with her own blood from digging her nails into her palms, body slick with sweat, she jumped up and ran for the bathroom. She almost made it to the toilet before she began to vomit. So much for restful sleep.

When she finished her visit with the swallowing bowl and cleaned herself up enough to feel comfortable leaving the safety of the bathroom without gagging, she went to the kitchen, and saw that the time was just after 4 in the morning, and her daughter was still missing.

CHAPTER 12

Wesley Michaels began to look into things on his own time. The disappearance of Mrs. Vondralin's daughter, and, though he would have tried not to admit it, into Mrs. Vondralin's background as well.

What he found out, at least about Rachael Vondralin, made him a little bit giddy, sort of like a kid with his first crush, which is actually just what it had been.

According to what he could figure out by her records of residence, her F.B.I. file, DMV, and state education records, she was the same girl who he'd spent his one summer with at Mr. Graham's farm. Or, more truthfully, spent his summer TRYING to be with. He'd hauled her ass out of the fire the first day there, when she'd fallen asleep cleaning the stables, and from there on out she'd been a pretty tough cookie. Turned out she worked for the guy for a few years after he was gone. He was impressed. Of course, he had been then too. Difference was, then he wouldn't have known what to do if he had been able to get her attention, now it was different. He wondered what she would do if he told her.

Wesley decided it was best not to intrude into her life, except in a professional capacity, until he either had some kind of news, or a damn good reason besides an awkward and mostly forgotten summer two decades earlier. So he dug looking for child disappearances that took place like Charlotte's.

Normally, if a child was kidnapped or ran off, it was when no one else would know, where no one would see. Of course, as with everything, there were exceptions.

This seemed to be planned though, or at least damn peculiar.

In the space of 25 minutes, not a small amount of time, but

not enough to run a marathon in either, a child, well behaved with no history of trouble, disappears. In the yard, an obvious patch of untouched snow, save four footprints, lends credence to something that Mrs. Vondralin said about staying 'out of the street' to her child, a sort of no-play zone. Still, there are four footprints, leading right up to the curb, pictures to corroborate, and one, single, solitary footprint, not matching the ones in the yard, much bigger than the ones in the yard, and the only footprint on that part of the street in a ten foot radius. Tires could have removed some but not all of them if there had been others. Law of averages . . . there would have to be more than the one footprint.

Still, it was a lot of speculation. He couldn't find any thing that matched the crime in any of the state files. He was only a blue-shirt, so his access to information was limited, although he'd already used some favors to get information on the little girl and her mother, he was about at the end of his rope. He didn't have access to F.B.I. files other than the one on Rachael Vondralin, which he'd swindled out of a friend who owed him from a poker game months earlier. Her file, as was the case with most other F.B.I. files Wesley had ever seen, had remarkable blank spots. Long periods of time unaccounted for, events described so vaguely that he was sure there was more to them but he didn't have the clout to personally go any further.

Not that it would have helped Wesley. Robert had never taken an victim from the same place twice, and had gone as far as South Carolina to get one. There was also the differences in the ages of the victims to consider, the youngest having been just over 6 years old and the oldest 21. There were a lot of things he did to prevent being hooked to a pattern. His job allowed him access to some interesting chemicals, and his location allowed him access to some interesting plants and animals. Some of the victims' bodies had been found, others had been permanently lost. NO, he wouldn't fit a pattern, in fact the only pattern he fit, was a pattern of striving not to fit into one. Chaos.

CHAPTER 13

Across the street from Rachael Vondralin, eight year old Teresa Roland watched the world go by and prayed for four in the afternoon to come quick so her dad would go to work. He was a mean man, never a kind word, always hitting, slapping, yelling. Mom just sat around, smoked and did nothing when Daddy hit her and Jaime. She got her share of bruises too.

Teresa, never having the luxury or freedom to be just a child, had become a warrior of sorts. Fighting for her survival and her sister's. Unfortunately, she was growing up fast. At eight years old she was in a position where she had to play mother to her sister, and in some senses be a father to her mother.

Jaime was very quiet, had been for as long as Teresa could remember, and dad had been touching her in the bad place longer than Teresa.

They both knew it was the bad place because they felt so icky, so DIRTY when he touched them there, they talked about it sometimes, cried. Jaime was not very good at 'coping' like mom said about bruises and stuff. When you didn't think about the hurt all the time, mom said it was 'coping.'

Teresa sometimes thought that Jaime would rather die than have dad touch her anymore, but Teresa watched her, watched out for her, and so far she was still okay.

She'd seen the man with the scarf and black stocking cap take Charlotte away a couple days earlier, but dad said that was 'not none of your affair.' So, even though she saw the guy run away with Charlotte and her mom really wanted to know if they saw anything, she couldn't tell. Charlotte was a nice girl though, she let Teresa ride her bike sometimes. She was sad that somebody

took her away. She wished someone would take her and Jaime away too.

Her father's footsteps echoed down the hallway, heavy, stomping, his breathing like a huge billows.

"Jaime, get in here," he said, pointing at their room. He would try to make mom think he was yelling at her for having a dirty room. He'd shut the door. Mom would smoke. She knew. She just didn't seem to care.

Someday, she'd make him pay, he'd pay for hurting Jaime, hurting her. It was a New Year. Maybe this would be the one.

CHAPTER 14

When Rachael awoke, at a little before eight a.m., she went into the kitchen and sat. She was trying to decide if she could stomach any sort of breakfast at the same time Teresa was hoping her father would go to work. Finally, at a bit after nine, she gave it a shot. It didn't turn out too well. Rachael spent most of the day feeling ill. She ate breakfast at a little after nine and threw it up at nine thirty. She dry heaved until ten. She slept restlessly off and on throughout the day. Doing nothing but sobbing, puking and sleeping. It was a wasted day, not even restful. She wanted to try and see the Green's housesitter, but when a nasty case of diarrhea joined in with the rest of her problems she decided that tomorrow would be a better day. Somehow the stress of the situation was not only destroying her capacity to think straight but it was making her physically ill too.

So on January 2nd, fresh into a new year, Rachael Vondralin continued her search for her daughter, trying to infuse herself with the belief and confidence that she would find her, soon.

She made her way up the street, to the last house on the block, on the side of the street opposite her. She knew that the Green's weren't home, but hopefully the housesitter would be. Maybe, just maybe, he saw something and could shed some light on the situation.

The door, Green as if an inadvertent pun, seemed darker than it had when she'd knocked on it before, days, months, years past. Perhaps it was because in the past year and especially the past few days her perspective on life had gotten so much dimmer. A couple hard raps and she waited. Almost a minute passed and began to turn to leave when she heard a rustling within the house. She turned back to the door and waited.

When he finally opened the door she was a little shocked. He stood there in only bikini underwear and it was obvious by the call to attention his member was observing that he had jumped right out of bed and come to the door. He wasn't more than 25 years old and looked a little bit naive. He was muscular though, built like a runner.

"Uh, I, I'd like to talk to you for a minute if you have a minute, Mr"

"Oh, I'm Jerred. Jerred Holtzclaw. What's up?"

"We are I suppose," he smiled graciously, even though she could tell he was anxious to go back to bed, "My name is Rachael Vondralin, I live just down the street, and, well, my daughter was kidnapped about 5 days ago—"

"Oh god, I'm sorry. I—"

"No, that's alright, but that's the reason I'm here to talk to you. I'd like to ask you some things."

He frowned, maybe thinking she suspected him. She had to admit that somewhere deep down in her mind the thought had occurred to her that the mystery 'housesitter' down the street had stolen her daughter. Once, she came face to face with him the idea had vanished.

"I just want to know if you saw anything."

His face softened. He stepped out of the way and waved her into the house.

"I'll go put some clothes on," he said, just realizing he wasn't dressed. Moments later he was back in a T-shirt and sweatpants, sitting on the couch. Before Rachael could explain herself, he was.

"I'm a nephew of the Green's. Shirley is my Aunt. So, when they went to Prineville, they didn't want to leave the house unattended in the cold weather, so they asked me to stay here. Free food, free cable. How could I say no?," he said, smiling.

She didn't want to kill his nice smile, but she had more pressing things on her mind.

"Did you see anything odd on the 28th? I mean, I know from neighbors that you came back here about noon on the

28th, somebody honked when they left,” he whispered an unheard name with a grin under his breath, “and I was wondering if you saw anything odd down the street. Opposite side. Would have been between 1 and 3.”

He thought.

CHAPTER 15

Robert McPherson had found his knack for fear, his desire for destruction, at the young age of 12. Not yet a teenager, he, unlike other children his age, spent his time playing with stray animals instead of action figures, toy trucks, and the like. Robert had no desire to play with other kids. His birthdays weren't punctuated by the laughter and screaming of young children and his days were never occupied by playing cops and robbers or things of that sort.

For a long time he tried to find out something that made them do what they did. Why did dogs smell in between legs? Why did cats rub themselves against his legs? Why did animals whine, bark, and jump around when they were in cages? Somehow the reactions that the animals had to being locked up seemed meaningful to him. It was interesting.

It was innocent enough. He initially intended no harm to the animals. His parents, well off, both making a killing at their respective, often discussed jobs, didn't care what he did for the most part, as long as it didn't interfere with their monetary ventures or a little feeding of their heads now and then. Even without the constant supervision of his parents Robert would have most likely been alright, a child with normal problems, wants, questions, and desires. However, an accident with a coffee table and a sharp corner had literally torn his left ear off of his head at the age of 6. His parents had cared only enough to be sure he could still hear, not enough to have reconstructive surgery done to replace the damaged, destroyed, flesh that had once been his ear. So, his hearing had degraded in his left ear, no longer having the cone of the ear on the outside to conduct sound as well, and he was left open to

all the jibes and cuts of the children he attended school with. Children below 15 years of age are more cruel than any adult could ever be. They haven't learned social graces yet and don't have any idea just how damaging some teasing can be.

Even so, with the teasing and the poor hearing in his left ear, Robert was still within the realm of normality at the age of 12. Inside himself there was a space that he had become aware of. A space that was a chasm, one which had an unknown end, but which was intriguing to him just the same. He was standing on a razor's edge, looking down at both sides, and his mind, prepubescent and full of questions, could only ask itself one thing it seemed. Why? Why? WHY?

He wanted to know why things happened, why his parents treated him more like an irritating pet than a child, why kids couldn't leave him alone, why everything sounded so weird out of his left ear. Why?

It happened by accident or by fate depending on point of view. He found out the answer to the only why question that turned out to be important. Why should he care? His answer turned out to be that he shouldn't. At least that's what he perceived the involuntary lesson from his dog and a rabies infected rat as meaning.

He'd had a cocker spaniel that he'd found wandering the streets near his house in San Diego, California, named Abby. The dog was a deep chocolate color, and remarkably well tempered, loving. He'd tried different things with the dog. Tying a stick to her collar, dangling a string with a piece of meat on the end of it, so she could never quite reach the treat. Putting a piece of tape on the back of the dog's head, so she would try and get it off to no avail, writhing, jerking around spastically, trying to remove the foreign object. There had been others, many others, but none that had actually hurt the dog. The things he had done were somewhat cruel in a sense, but none of them had crippled the animal, made it any less loving.

So on a Saturday morning, like any other before, he went out into the garage of his house, as he often did, to 'play' with Abby.

And found her cowering in the corner of her kennel, growling, on the verge of barking. Quivering. Yet, despite all indications to the contrary, he could tell she was horrified. The small rat that was getting at her food was scaring the hell out of her. He watched, entranced by the power the small rodent had over the canine over 10 times its size.

It was a dirty, blackish-gray rat, little yellow teeth, and beady eyes darting back and forth, displaying no fear of the dog, yet scaring the dog out of its wits. The rat's eyes were filmy, covered with a phlegmy substance, and as he moved closer, compelled by some internal force, Robert noticed that it looked sickly, ill.

As Robert came closer, nearing the door of the portable kennel, only a few feet away, the rat began to back away from Abby's food. It began to hiss at him. It wasn't scared, even of him, bigger than Abby, still not scared. Robert wanted to be that way, no fear, others fearing him, what he could do, at that moment he knew it. The rat reared back, preparing to launch its rabies infected body at the young boy.

Then, at the last moment, Abby was there, on top of the rat, much bigger, much more powerful once she'd overcome her fear, wanting to help her master more than save herself, she grabbed it in her teeth and tried to bite down, but the rodent dug its claws into her snout. She squealed and tossed her head to the right, slamming the rat into the corner. It came at her this time, attacking her as best it could. It jumped onto her snout, biting, digging with its claws, and Robert shook with pleasure. He didn't really care about either the rat or the dog any longer, but on some elementary level he wanted the rat to somehow prevail over the dog.

She shook her head frantically, blood spattering on the sides of her cage, whimpering. Her eyes seemed to connect with his for a moment, begging, pleading for help. He smiled, watched. Next, as if realizing she would have to save herself, she laid down on the floor of her kennel and began to scrape at her snout with her paws. Moments later she had the rat pinned under her left front paw, and Robert thought he saw human disgust in her eyes as she looked

up at him. She bit the head off of the rat and crawled back into the corner of her cage. Slowly, she licked at her snout with her long tongue, trying to stifle the bleeding and the burning that the rat had caused. Robert was disappointed.

He took care of the dog, he always had, and his parents very rarely saw her, or wanted to. As Abby progressed further and further into her state of decay due to rabies, Robert watched her die, loving every moment of it. Something about the fact that he was in control, no matter how badly she wanted out, how much she wanted to get at him or anyone else, he was in control; and he would let her die. And let her die he did.

Of course, when it was all said and done, he buried Abby in the backyard, feigning tears, acting like the hurt little boy who'd lost his dog. His parents, of course, acted like the sorrowful parents who don't know how to console their child after the loss of his companion. Neither of the sentiments were genuine, but both Robert and his parents played their roles well, for the duration of his childhood. Robert's parents even buying him a bike to make up for the loss of his dog, that among other things was the beginning of his new type of experiments.

He liked watching Abby and the rat die. He wanted to see more, in fact, Robert wanted to cause it. Inspired, Robert taught himself how to kill. Spokes, chains around the crank mechanism of the bike, far out into the underbrush of the surrounding trees, were inventive if not interesting ways to torture the life out of animals. Sticks sharpened into spears, knives, fishing line, and lots of other things. He worked his way into the world of poisonous insects, substances. A dozen black widows, a couple of spoonfuls of Clorox.

It could have stopped at that. Kids did weirder things and still wound up as normal adults. Not Robert though, he found that killing insects or small animals wasn't enough. Soon he had moved on to livestock. Tipping cows was common but gutting them and spilling their innards was something that he became rather adept at. Articles in local newspapers cropped up now and then offering

rewards leading to the capture of the persons responsible for the deaths of local ranchers cattle. Nothing ever came of these things though, Robert made sure to cover his tracks. Horses took up a significant part of his adolescence. Their tails were very soft. He often kept them just for mementos. Similar efforts were made to find the killer in the deaths of local horses but again no one was ever caught.

Robert divided his time between his studies and his hobby. He maintained a grade point average high enough to get him into virtually any school he chose and at the same time managed to hone his murderous methods to a razor sharp point at the same time. At 17 he decided to take the big leap. Human prey.

This was the crossroads for Robert. He had made an attempt for a short period of time to return to some sort of state of normalcy. For a full three months he didn't kill a single living thing. He changed his type of dress, his attitude, his demeanor, and his mind. He wanted desperately to find someone to be with. Perhaps it was hormones or one last whimper from the depths of his soul. He had a crush on a girl who was only slightly less bookish than he. She wasn't a cheerleader, an athlete, or any other thing that kept her out late on weeknights. Robert found himself involved in nocturnal emissions with her at the core. The time came when he found the courage to ask her out on a date, just a burgers and movie date, but a date nevertheless.

She turned him down with just a moments hesitation and in that moment Robert's existence was decided, by him or by fate. Earlier in his life he had been at a similar life changing intersection and naively wound up taking the most gruesome of turns and after his rejection by the object of his affections, he built a wall between himself and the road back to the straight and narrow path in the instant she refused him. In that instant she ceased to be a human being and became a painful object to be destroyed.

Robert gracefully left her alone and began plotting her death as he slouched away from her in disappointment. Methods of killing her spread out in front of him for as far as he could imagine.

Skinning, boiling, bloodletting, and dozens of other methods of death crossed his mind. He would make her pay for hurting him in such a fashion. It would just take a bit of planning.

It was the week before his graduation from high school, one year later almost to the day he had asked her out on a date, that he took her life. It had taken that long to make sure that his plan was foolproof. He had to be sure there would be no evidence, nothing that could be traced back to him. Robert had observed the route she took home more times than he could count. The path was obstructed by trees and fences for a good mile and a half. No one would see him take her and no one would suspect a full year after his rejection.

Her name was Laura Whitney. She was 18 years and 17 days old the day that Robert smashed her skull in. She had been walking down the same path she'd walked down for almost four years while returning home. It was a secluded and quiet way to reach her destination and was just a bit out of the way where she might have gone. Her path home made it easy for Robert to take her life with out the knowledge of anyone else.

Robert had made sure that he wouldn't be seen. He was dressed in full raingear, rubber gloves, shoes from the local goodwill, and a thick branch cut off of a tree earlier in the day. He didn't care whether she knew it was him or not. At that point he hadn't learned to appreciate the pleading and screaming of his victims. All that was important to him then was to be rid of her. To stop the pain she had caused him. She had almost been his salvation but at the instant he heard the crunch of the branch against her skull, not knowing which of the two had actually made the crunching sound, she had become the method of his damnation.

137 times. That was the number of times the police determined she had been bludgeoned. Of course, Robert was never even questioned. When a routine call was made to his house by the police department, his parents insisted that he had been home sick. They had no clue that he had climbed out of his bedroom window to commit homicide during the afternoon of that day.

Robert was sore and tired from his first human victim but his nocturnal emissions had taken on an entirely different feel now. It was the killing that made him excited. Over and over he dreamt of the crushing blows to Laura's head until he climaxed in his sleep and slipped into a deeper, darker sleep which was entirely devoid of dreams. These dreams began to take shape though. The empty sleep after became the sleep where the true ideas began to manifest.

It wasn't long after the death of Laura and the new and renewed interest in killing began that Robert became interested in the idea of doors. What he could put behind them, who he could put behind them. The idea grew in his mind, like a festering sore.

By the age of 18 Robert had become very interested in the world of chemistry, and had graduated from high school, attaining a full scholarship to USC. He was a biochemist, complete, 6 years later. His parents died in an odd, unexplainable house fire his third year. Seemed they were playing some sort of sex games and had handcuffed one another to the bed. The house had caught fire somehow, and if the guessing of the police and fire department were correct, they couldn't find the key to unlock themselves so they had died in the blaze. At least that's how it appeared to the police after Robert had taken care of all the details. Of course, Robert mourned for them the whole time he was home and at the funeral, couldn't have the police suspecting him or anything of the such. It all played out perfectly. Two days after he was back at USC, he began to make arrangements to buy a plot of land somewhere in Arizona. Not too far outside of Flagstaff.

Robert learned fast, he'd taught himself just about everything he'd ever considered important, how to kill, when, what. The numbers of his victims already numbered in the double digits by the time he was preparing for his graduation from USC.

When he had finished college and moved to Arizona. He began constructing his . . . customized house. Robert did continuous research, figuring out how he would make his dream come true.

The initial house, the framework, electricity, and plumbing, was constructed by contractors. He didn't want to arouse too much suspicion by building the whole damn thing himself. When the house was 'finished' from the construction company's point of view, he paid them off, and began to rebuild it, from the inside out, to his own hidden specifications.

He started his job with the U.S. Geological service not more than six months after his arrival. Someone with as many qualifications and awards as he had received throughout his life, even graduating from USC with honors, was snatched up pretty quickly when needed. The Geological service had needed both him and his expertise.

Just like that Robert was employed, provided with all sorts of supplies that were more than useful to him, and he was building his 'dream' house, money not an obstacle to him. The large sum of money from his parents insurance along with his pay from the Geological service, took care of all his expenses.

Soon enough, everything was the way he'd wanted it. The house, his life, his image, and he was ready for the next step. He put in for two weeks vacation. Next, a drive to Houston, Texas. He returned home after only a week. With a present for himself in the trunk, his first of many such presents. A sixteen year old girl, an 'it', for him to invite into his home, she would be his house warming party in a sense.

He'd taken her in the middle of March, the first day of Spring break. Her parents would probably wait a couple of days before making any sort of trouble, by that time it would already be too late. He hadn't begun to think of the parents of the 'its' as an active part of the situation at the time. That first time he'd only wanted the 'it' for his prize. He hadn't realized the added bonus that parents could add to the equation, but he would, he would.

She spent two full months in the closet sized space which would also house Charlotte Vondralin. The difference being the sixteen year old's food was given to her through a slot in the back wall of the little space. AND it was given on plates with utensils to eat with.

She, unlike Charlotte, didn't get out of the little space at all during her two months. Her body, much bigger and taller than Charlotte, was not able to adequately exercise use of her muscles while in the space. The muscles, tendons, ligaments, and joints of her body began to stiffen, atrophy. She attempted whatever retaliation she could think of.

Once she had stabbed Robert in the hand with a fork when he was sliding her food in through the slot. There the Tupperware bowls started. The half-bucket wouldn't start until a few more captives managed to put up a fight.

When all was said and done, and Robert had his fun watching her go from pleading to threatening, to begging, to retreating within herself, to calling for her mother, and on and on, he let her move on to the final stage.

The door that had been closed on her for two months, opened.

Stunning her and destroying her sight temporarily. She looked out of the crack in the doorway, and saw the hardwood floor, and what looked to be the front door. She had started to crawl toward it.

She'd gotten out of her little cage, crawling jerkily, painfully, nearly out of her mind. Alternately crying and laughing.

She was dead ten minutes later. After the removal of the epidermal layer of her skin the rest was boring to Robert. All she had done as he peeled the skin from her body was stare up into space and form silent words with her mouth. It had not been pretty.

CHAPTER 16

“Well, I do remember this old white Chevy that kept going by, you know. Pointy taillights, well kept. I mean the car was in cherry condition so I took a good gander. Guess it must have gone by about 1 o’clock or so. It was a few days ago so I could be wrong.”

Rachael nodded, nothing. It was about the same thing that Mr. Wright had said. Just another passing car and none of them at the right time.

“Are you sure? There’s nothing else you can think of?”

Again, Jerred thought. He looked around the room, searching whatever internal files held his memories. When Jerred finally found what he was looking for he nearly jumped through the roof.

“OH, wait! I do remember something else. The guy in the car, the white Chevy, had driven by earlier in the day. About 9, maybe 10, and I thought maybe he was looking for something cause’ he drove so slow. Then I left and didn’t think much about it. I got back about noon, which you know, and I saw him again about 1,” he stopped, his face taking on a quizzical expression, his head cocked to one side like a confused dog, then he brightened and spoke again, “Actually, I guess it would have been closer to 2 o’clock because I was supposed to be here for a phone call from my Uncle at 1:30. He called at about 1:40, I remember looking at the clock over there,” he pointed, “and I had just gotten off of the phone when it went by.”

Rachael didn’t move, couldn’t move. It didn’t mean a thing. Didn’t PROVE a thing. But it felt like it did. The car, the faceless unknown person within it, seemed to symbolize the cause of all of her sorrow. She convinced herself in a matter of seconds that whatever answers needed to be found had something to do with the

white car that Jerred had just described to her. Tentatively she asked him the next question, the important one.

“Did you see him, Jerred?”

“Uh, not really. He was wearing a black stocking cap and a scarf. Heat must have been out or something,” he looked at her and read her expression, “You think that’s the guy who took your little girl?”

“Nothing else fits. You’re the only person who remembered anything helpful, remotely helpful. Even if it’s nothing it at least gives me something to concentrate on.”

“Well, I’m sorry I couldn’t do more.”

“NO, thank you very much. You’ve done more than you could possibly imagine.”

He looked at her for a moment, eyes full of pity. It made Rachael uncomfortable.

“If I can help you with anything else, Mrs. Vondralin, I’ll be here for about another week.”

“Thank you.”

She went home, made herself lunch, and had no trouble keeping it down. In fact, she ate four huge sandwiches. Now, although it was tiny, there was something for her to hold onto. She just didn’t know what to do with it.

Theo had come over for a few moments while she was making herself lunch. He’d gotten roses from somewhere and proceeded to bring them to her.

“Just tryin’ to raise your spirits,” he suggested as he turned away from her front door.

Rachael hadn’t had a response. Not that she needed one. The old man was trying to deaden the blow that could come slamming down upon her at any moment. Her daughter could be dead.

Her options were limited though. The inquisition of her neighbors, even as short as it had been, had shed little light on the situation.

Still, AGENT Fitzgerald was not an option for her. She didn’t even consider calling him. So, she decided to call the police. She couldn’t remember the name of the officer who had initially responded

to her call, but she had his name and supervisor written down in her address book. The Portland Police Department didn't have badge numbers it turned out.

She called the station in the Hollywood District, the nearest one to her home, and inquired about the badge number. It belonged to an Officer Michaels. He wouldn't be on duty again for two days. She gave her name and asked them to have him call her when he got in. It was the only shot she had. He was the only one who seemed genuinely interested in helping. She guessed he must have gotten the F.B.I. involved so quickly, for all the good it did her. She couldn't help but be grateful for the help he'd tried to lend, even though it hadn't done any good.

She spent the rest of the day watching the house across the street as best she could. An old pair of binoculars that John had in college aided her. Still, she couldn't see as well as she would have liked. The Roland's front window was visible from hers. As was a good part of their front yard. She assumed that meant their perspective was the same. She waited for a face to appear in the window.

She ate, listened to the news on 1190 KEX the local news station, and watched the house, the Roland's house.

At four o'clock, Mr. Roland, dressed in blue coveralls with an unclear name over the right breast pocket, emerged from the house and went to his car. Moments later he was gone.

She watched the window.

If it had been Mr. Roland watching, if he had seen Charlotte, or anything that had happened to her, then she wouldn't ever know a thing. Perhaps the mother had seen something though, or one of the girls, then maybe, just maybe.

She watched the window and, as she had done days before, fell asleep.

She was rolling the huge snowball around the front yard. Rachael AND Charlotte. Mother and Daughter. Charlotte was blue.

Dead. Decaying. Somehow, as it is in dreams sometimes, it

didn't seem important. What was important was that she knew where her daughter was. The two of them pushed the increasingly massive snowball around the yard. It was now bigger than the two of them put together, but that didn't seem to matter either.

Charlotte made noise when she moved. A crunching, stretching noise like a rope stretched to its limits. Rachael figured it was rigormortis. She looked down at her daughter, her eye sockets empty and smiling a toothless grin. She stutter stepped. It finally struck her, the macabre, morbid thing in front of her, it was her daughter. She tried to scream and couldn't. The snowball, now the size of a house, began to roll toward her. It was all very absurd, and SO horrifying at the same time. Charlotte was laughing. She looked back at her running away as she fell to the ground, the huge snowball only feet away.

Miles of untouched snow seemed to lie between Charlotte and the street. Yet four steps, four huge leaps, brought her to the curb. Then a white car. More like a white hearse.

A cloaked being. Finger beckoning the little dead girl who had once been her daughter. It was skeletal. Again, failed attempt at a scream. Her legs began to screech in pain. She looked down at them quickly. A red stain began to spread around them. She was being crushed. She looked back at the hearse.

Charlotte climbed willingly into the back door and waved with a creaking arm. Rachael shook in pain and absolute burning fury. The car drove away. The pain in her lower regions had become excruciating.

She looked back to the street once more. A disembodied leg stood in the street. Cut off at the knee, dribbling cold blood, it stood as a symbol, as proof positive of her daughters abduction. She reached for it. Pain exploded in her bladder as it was crushed. She looked down at herself. It had destroyed her from the ribcage down. She screamed as it barreled down on her and awoke.

She had urinated all over herself, and fell onto her face as she tried to stand. Both of her legs pricked and pulled with the needles of having been asleep. She cursed herself for dozing, a thousand

times worse than any other person would have. She grabbed the now moistened binoculars and looked out the window, trying to stand, failing.

The little girl, Teresa, was looking out the Roland's front window. She was the one. The one who had seen something if there had been something to be seen. She grimaced and tried to stand again, gripping the edge of the chair she had been sitting in.

She managed to get herself walking again in a couple of minutes. Putting on her snow gear and getting together her pad and pen she set out across her street to talk to the little girl. She wouldn't take no for an answer.

Moments later, angry, cold, and burning with a desire to kick someone's ass, to make them pay for the worrying she was doing, she knocked on the Roland's door.

The mother of the two little girls came to the door, cigarette dangling from in between her lips, smoke jetting from her nostrils.

"Mrs. Roland, I—"

"Sorry, we ain't got anything to say to you, ma'am," the woman started to shut the door in her face. Rachael stuck her well padded moon boot clad foot in the doorway.

The woman inside, nameless secretary of a dentist, took a deep drag off of her cigarette, but didn't seem affected by Rachael's bravado. Still, she let go of the door and stepped back from it. Rachael stepped into the house and closed the door behind her. She made no move to sit down, nor to apologize for her behavior. Her reason for coming was not social and she had no desire to be social with the woman.

"Mrs. Roland, did you see what happened to my daughter?"

The woman sat down on her worn and dirtied couch, crushing out her cigarette, "Nope, none of us did. So you can just leave the way you came now."

Rachael was incensed. She was sure that the children knew something even if the parents didn't, but for some reason either her husband or she and her husband didn't want anyone to know.

Perhaps, they had something to do with it. It made her even more angry. She took two steps toward the woman, while she was lighting another cigarette, and was then right on top of her. She looked up, seemingly unaffected.

"WHAT?," she said, her voice betraying her calm exterior, it seemed as though she might have been treated in such a manner more than she would liked to have shown.

"Mrs. Roland, my daughter is missing. I need to know if you saw anything."

The woman took time to light another cigarette. She held the pack out to Rachael who took one. It had been a long time since she'd kicked the habit, but somehow the reasons seemed irrelevant now.

"We didn't see anythin'."

For a moment Rachael maintained her composure. Her rational floodgates deep within her mind struggled with the force of her frustration and anger. She tried not to explode, not to take out her fears and feelings of helplessness on the woman. In the end, the dam was just too weak.

"DAMN IT," Rachael screamed, her face reddening, and grabbed the woman by her shirt lifting her off of the couch, "TELL ME!!!"

The woman's eyes were filled with fear, but not the kind that is a reaction to someone acting violently for the first time, she was prepared for whatever Rachael planned to do, although it scared her. Rachael reeled her arm back, wanting only to scare the woman into telling her what she was holding back, and heard a soft but defiant voice speak up from behind her.

"Don't hurt my mom."

She turned around and saw the little girl, Teresa. The bigger girl was right behind her. Rachael let go of the mother and she plopped down onto the couch.

She kneeled down on one knee. The little girl was trying to stare a hole right through her, such a hard look. It was familiar somehow.

"Don't hurt my mom," the little girl repeated. The bigger girl nodded.

"I don't really want to hurt your mom, sweetheart. I just want to know what happened to my little girl. I think she knows, but she won't tell me."

The girl looked at her, trying to form a judgement with her young mind as to whether or not to trust Rachael.

"Daddy, he said not to say nothing about it." The bigger girl nodded again, vehemently.

Rachael's heart began to pound, her breathing became shallow. Teresa knew something about where Charlotte was.

"It's alright honey, you can tell me, I won't tell your Daddy."

"NO. Don't you tell her nothing, Teresa," said the mother from behind Rachael.

She stood and put her hand on the little girl's head. She spoke in a perfectly civil tone, but the words Rachael said meant much more than the tone.

"Mrs. Roland, I assure you that if you keep your daughter from telling me anything she knows that I'll have every news station in town over here, bugging you at home, your husband at work, and anywhere else I can think of. Not to mention, I'll follow your daughters to school if I have to, but I WILL find out what they know."

The woman cowed. Perhaps she believed Rachael's threat, or was just tired of fighting, but she gave up and spoke to her daughters.

"Teresa, you and your sister tell this lady what you saw. I'll be in the garage washin' clothes." She stood, and walked to a closed door adjacent to her. She looked at Rachael.

Rachael spoke, trying to apologize for her behavior.

"Thank you, thank you so—"

"Don't thank me. If you bring anyone back here to write it down or anything the girls won't remember a thing." She stepped out into her garage and closed the door behind her. Rachael moved over to sit on the couch. The two girls sat on the floor in front of her, it was a familiar set up, having once been a teacher. She began to ask the girls questions.

Out in the garage, Mrs. Roland hastily dialed her husband's work number.

"You're Teresa and you're," she pointed at the older girl, "uh, what IS your name, honey?"

The girl hung her head, it didn't seem that she was used to being talked to, at least not kindly, but she did speak.

"Jaime. My name is Jaime."

The little girl looked at her in astonishment for a moment. The look was gone nearly as quickly as it had appeared.

"Okay, Jaime and Teresa, you know my little girl Charlotte right?"

The two little girls nodded, Jaime smiled just slightly.

"Well, she kind of, um, disappeared a few days back and I thought maybe you—"

The older girl spoke again, her voice like an outburst she couldn't control.

"Are you gonna get us away from Daddy?"

Rachael felt her stomach begin to boil with nausea, this wasn't the direction things were supposed to go. In fact, the little girls were just supposed to tell her what they knew and she would be on her way. Still, this girl was trying to ask for her help, to reach out for her. She couldn't let herself ignore her.

"Why would I get you away from your Daddy, Jaime?"

Teresa looked back at Jaime and spoke in a cautious tone, too cautious, too SERIOUS for a child her age.

"Don't Jaime. If you do Daddy will . . . you know."

The older girl's eyes widened, grew so huge it seemed that they would jump out of her head.

"NO, Teresa," Rachael said, turning the little girl's head toward her by the chin, "Don't worry about your Daddy, we'll take care of him, just let Jaime talk."

Rachael saw the first hint of trust enter the little girl's eyes and she looked at her older sister again, nodding.

"Daddy hurts me."

Rachael glanced at Teresa, tears were rolling down her cheeks.

Mrs. Roland came back into the living room twenty minutes later and the three of them, Rachael and the two little girls, were crying like loons. Her stance suggested confidence, but her eyes projected fear, horrible fear. Rachael stood.

"Jaime, Teresa, go get your coats on. You're going to come over to my house for a little while, alright?"

The two little girls looked confused, but started toward their bedroom anyway.

"NO, you will do no such thing. Your Daddy's coming home in a few minutes and he'll take care of you then."

Fresh tears began to roll down the face of the older daughter, but the little girl, Teresa, stood her ground for a moment and spoke to her mother.

"No, Mommy, we're gonna go with Charlotte's mom. She's gonna make Daddy stop hurting us."

The woman took a noticeable step back. She looked as though she had been slapped. Then, directing her rage at whatever the world had done to her at her children, she stepped forward, arm raised as Rachael's had been less than a half an hour earlier. Jaime cringed, fearing the blow, Teresa stood solid. Rachael pushed the shorter, weaker woman down, on to her couch.

Less than a minute later the girls had their coats, and were headed out the door with Rachael. Their father's car pulled up in the driveway after only a few steps out of the doorway.

Rachael saw red. She truly wanted to kill this man. She wasn't even sure what she'd do to whoever took her daughter, but she was sure she wanted this man dead.

He was out of the car and striding toward her calmly, a look of hatred in his eyes.

His wife looked out of the front window of their house.

He reached for the arm of his bigger daughter. Rachael held it out of his reach. He looked at her and shook his head. She knew at that moment that it was the turning point. His body tensed.

"You will not hurt these girls anymore, Mr. Roland."

He froze, hesitant.

"I know what you've been doing. They've told me everything," except about Charlotte, she thought randomly, "and I will not let you . . . destroy anymore of their lives than you already have."

He began to shake in anger, he was going to kill her, she was sure of it. He took a step toward her reaching out with his hands for her throat, his wife called out from inside the house, and Rachael kicked him with all of her might in the testicles. He dropped to his knees. Jaime's jaw dropped, and Teresa began to laugh. Rachael kicked him in the nose. She heard it crunch, sure it was broken, and began to cross the street, the little girls in tow.

She was half way across when she heard him come lumbering out into the street, she turned, not sure if she could gain the upper hand again. She got around just fast enough to see him fall flat on his ass, slipping in the snow. She grinned.

She got to her front steps and looked back. The man was still in the street, red as a beet. He was holding his chest.

She wanted to leave him lying in the middle of the street but as much as that would satisfy her it would rob the little girls of their chance to settle their scores, no matter how they did it.

She went to him and immediately the fear of a feigned heart attack disappeared. His eyes bulged in their sockets and he resembled a fish out of water the way his mouth moved trying to speak. She yelled to the wife, telling her to call an ambulance. She began to perform CPR. Ten minutes later when the ambulance arrived, the man was dead. It wasn't her fault, she'd done the best she could. The man obviously wasn't one of the 3 percent of people who could be revived or kept alive with CPR. The attempts by the paramedics and hospital personnel proved just as fruitless. The girls stayed with Rachael as their mother took her final ride with their father.

Neither of them seemed particularly bothered by the passing of their father. In fact, Jaime seemed jubilant. In time it could change, Rachael thought, but it wasn't likely. She knew from experience.

After dinner and a little television she sat them both down at the kitchen table and began the process of trying to get whatever

information about her daughters disappearance that the little girls possessed. It turned out to something different than what she had expected.

Initially, she expected little more than what the Green's housesitter had told her, perhaps a little more description, but nothing like the flood of information that Teresa had to offer. In addition, the scene that Jaime turned out to have seen, was the first solid step toward finding her daughter. For better or worse.

All the while Rachael struggled with the desire to call Children's Services of Oregon about the girls. Their father was dead but it didn't change the fact that their mother had let the whole situation happen. Every synapse of her brain fired at the same time, telling her to call, to ensure the girls were taken care of, but something kept her from doing so. Perhaps it was the thought of her mother in a similar situation or maybe it was just a matter of not being able to trust anyone besides herself anymore after the Portland Police Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation had failed her.

"You both know Charlotte, right?"

Both of the girls nodded.

"Do you know who took her?"

Teresa and Jaime looked at each other, then at Rachael.

"Did you see who took her?"

"Yep," Teresa said, picking at the beige colored carpet of the living room.

Rachael tried not to get excited, but she felt herself flush.

"Who? Who was it?!"

Teresa eyed her, suspicious of her anxiousness, but spoke anyway.

"A man in a white car. Old."

"The man was old?"

"No, the car. He had long hair though. Couldn't see his face, he was wearing a hat."

"Did you see anything Jaime?"

She shrugged her shoulders, dropped her head.

"Teresa, what else did you see?"

The little girl dug through the past few days worth of memories, trying to remember anything else at all. Her eyes lit up.

"The sign on the back of his car, it said 'Big Rock.'"

Rachael looked confusedly at the little girl.

"What sign?"

"The sign on all the cars, on the front and back. Only his was only on the front."

License plates.

"What color was the sign, Teresa?"

"I, uh, I don't remember."

"Think hard, honey. What color was it?"

The little girl paused, face scrunched up, as deep in thought as she could get. Finally, she spoke.

"I can't remember."

Rachael's heart sank. She unconsciously let her shoulders drop and her head hang.

Jaime looked at her, eyes full of adoration and a desire to please, and when she spoke her voice was so low it was almost like a whisper.

"The license plate said, 'Arizona' but I don't remember what color it was."

The next day, after the death of her husband had settled in, Mrs. Roland came over to Rachael's house.

The knock was light, the expression on her face as Rachael looked through the peephole was one of regret and embarrassment. Nowhere on the woman's face did sorrow show.

Rachael opened the door. She had been thinking of ways to put the information the children had given her to work, but as of yet, she had no ideas. It was only a matter of time.

Mrs. Roland stepped timidly into the house and asked if she could come in. Rachael, contrary to the treatment she'd received at her house, graciously stepped out of the way.

The two of them sat, the girls still asleep in Charlotte's room, in her bed. It hurt her to have them there but in the long run it would heal them much more than it would hurt her.

"Mrs. Vondralin, I'm sorry for the way I treated you," Mrs. Roland said.

Glancing at Rachael to see the effect of her words, she continued.

Rachael's face gave nothing away, but at the relief on Mrs. Roland's face, the lessening of the shame, and the release from the life, the imprisonment, she'd had with her husband, Rachael softened.

"I want you to know, although I loved my husband I know he was, well, not a perfect man. I think that both myself and the girls are better off without him in the long run."

Rachael didn't speak. It was time for the woman to come clean, if not for herself then for her children.

"I want, no, I NEED to have Jaime and Teresa with me, to take care of, to make up for all the things I've done wrong in their lives, and I know that if you try you can stop me, you can take them away from me. I guess that's why I'm here, to ask you for my children. My husband did things to them that I can't begin to imagine, not to mention what he did to me. I want to make it up to them, my ignorance, my drunkenness robbed them of the chance for any sort of normal childhood. Maybe, now that he's gone and I can face up to what happened, I can make it right now. I need . . . I need the chance to try."

Rachael nodded, but still did not speak.

"Please Mrs. Vondralin, help me do this. Let my children come back to me, let me try to fix the things I've screwed up."

Rachael looked into the woman's face trying to read her. Whether or not she felt it was right in the eyes of society for the girls to go back with their mother, it was right in her eyes, so she would let the subject of their father's mistreatment fall by the wayside. She would have to get therapy, both for herself and her girls, that was an absolute fact. Somehow she would have to become a competent mother. As she spoke to the woman, whose name turned out to be Rhonda, about treatment for the girls and money to get by she wondered whether or not she would take

what Rachael said to heart. If she didn't her children could wind up in a situation far worse than hers had been, if that was possible.

It turned out that her husband's company had a mandatory life insurance policy worth just over \$250,000 which would take care of them for quite a while if used right, not to mention she had spoken with a psychiatrist, whose card she showed to Rachael, earlier in the morning about the girls and the problems, the horrid things their father had done to them. It was obvious the woman wanted to mend the wounds created by her now dead spouse. Rachael had no problem letting things go, for the moment. She asked to have the girls come over and stay with Charlotte once in a while, to see how they were, as if she was sure Charlotte would ever be back. That's how she chose to feel, whether it was true or not.

She began making phone calls to every person in creation who might be able to lend even the slightest help. AGENT Fitzgerald informed her that he would get to her new information 'A.S.A.P.' and that he would try to interview the girls sometime in the next couple of days. Rachael didn't find his response very comforting. Officer Michaels was her next call but he wasn't in for her to talk to and she didn't know what sort of message to leave so she left none. Frustration was the single word to describe her attempt to pass on the new information to someone who could use it. She had no idea what to do. Waiting was impossibly difficult but that's what she had to do.

So, after a day away from home, and a night in a bed where there were no worries of a father touching them in the 'bad place' the two girls went home with their mother, not quite sure how to deal with the situation. Rachael asked them to call her in a couple of days. In the time between she would do what she could with the still shaky information about her daughters kidnapper.

CHAPTER 17

Robert decided it was time to take a trip. Time to see if the mother of his captive was going to take the bait. Would she try and find him? Maybe she was already trying. Perhaps, like the father of the boy, she had talked to the people in her neighborhood. Possibly, they had given her enough information to try something, his bet was that the old man and the little girl who'd been watching in the window had had something to tell her if that had been the case. Assuming she had talked to them.

Ten days worth of food. A can opener, two bowls, ten gallons of water, 65 cans of soup, chili, whatever else he could find that came in a can. The 'it' would be okay, and even if she wasn't, there was the mother to play with.

He made arrangements to take time off from work, to care for all of the little 'normalcy' type things in his life. Next, he packed his car, got together important things, just in case he couldn't come back home, and left. Perhaps, if he was lucky, he could pickup another present for himself, another it while he was there.

The car full of gas, the trunk checked; seal good, and a load of 'Whatchamacallit's' in the front seat, he was ready. Ready to toss out the hook and, if he was lucky, reel in a big mother.

He smiled, started his car, and pulled out of the driveway, while in hell that had once been a house, Charlotte Vondralin yelled at the top of her lungs for help, to no avail. Crowded into a space half the size of a closet, packed in with what seemed like a million cans, a dozen plastic jugs of water, two bowls and a can opener, she was not very comfortable, and she was still scared as hell. Tears ran down her face in futile anguish.

It was very possible that the inside of the closet that held her would be the last thing she'd ever see.

Flagstaff, Arizona, more than a day's drive from Portland, Oregon, was 15 miles away from Robert's house. He lived outside the city, on a dry, dusty plot of land that was good for nothing but rock and snake hunting. Both of which he took pleasure in. His trip would take him through several large cities, and he would practice what he had come to call 'stealth hunting' along the way. A sort of random killing typically attributed to a serial killer in the region, he always got away with it. In fact, as with the personal killings in his home, he made sure to kill the ones on the road in different way each time as well, in order to prevent any sort of pattern that might be attributed to one killer. He didn't want to take the chance that a trail might lead back to him. He had gotten rather good at inventing new and ungodly ways to kill human beings, so good that he often thought that Hitler would have replaced Himmler with him, had the choice been available at the time.

Robert took great pride in his hobby. Or perhaps, in a way, his work. The killing of the ones that he took back to his home was different than the ones on the road. They held an entirely different place in his heart. Sometimes, when things panned out just right, he would feel almost like he had that day when his dog had been attacked by the rat. It was like being outside of himself and watching as he attacked the person. Always they saw him as harmless. Never suspecting his attack until it was too late. The rat attacking the dog. Robert striking from nowhere.

His first stop on his hurried trip to Portland was Los Angeles. Robert consistently went out of his way in order to ensure no one would easily follow his path. After gas, food, and a leak of epic proportions, he made his way along the highway through the city. Stopping only once he found his victim. A 65 year old woman, desiring only a ride home, became a release for the man who had destroyed so many lives for his own personal pleasure, his own personal psychosis.

Her name was Mary Walters, a Hispanic married to a Caucasian who had died five years earlier . . . she wasn't particularly happy about continuing life without him, but when Robert initially tried to take her life, things became just a bit more complicated than he would have liked.

The night advanced quickly, as it did in January, and the lights of Los Angeles gave a low buzzing glow to the city. As he exited the freeway the woman glanced curiously at him. "Gas," he explained. Robert stopped abruptly near a group of shrubs, making the older woman smash her head into the dashboard. She muttered under her breath, rubbing her forehead, and looked toward him, a quizzical look on her face.

He smiled as he lifted the square, sharp cleaver from the door pocket. It gleamed ever so slightly in the dim light cast by the streetlights.

He saw fear flash in the woman's eyes for a split second. It was like a drug, and he wanted more. Robert brought the cleaver up beside his head. Still, he was unable to get the full force swing due to the cramped space in his car. So, his plan to bring the razor sharp cleaver down full force in a vicious arc, killing the old woman instantaneously as it crashed through the bones of her skull into her brain didn't quite go as he had planned.

Instead she punched him in the face, breaking his nose, and the cleaver dug deep into the seat of the car, just barely cutting into her left thigh.

He screamed in frustration and pain. He hated it when these random road killings put up a fight. They were supposed to be quick and easy.

She bolted out of the car and off into the orchard they had stopped by. She was old, but fear made her fast and wily.

He was out of the car perhaps two seconds after her, but they were a valuable two seconds. He could no longer see her. However, in her haste, she was making a great deal of noise.

Her thoughts raced. She no longer had her husband around to mourn for her, and her four children although loving most likely

would get along just fine without her. They were all adults. She crashed through the trees knocking season browned leaves to the ground, all the while trying to find a place to hide. There were no noble desires or motives for trying to escape the man with the cleaver, she just simply did not want to die.

Finally, after seemingly running forever, her aging lungs laboring and heart beating entirely too fast, she happened upon a small storage shed. The door. She tried it. Locked. She threw her rather substantial weight against the door and heard the creak and crack of the old wood as it gave way and spilled her onto the floor inside.

Robert ran through the rows of trees like, as, a mad man. He ducked and dove, rolled and crawled. It was just another game to him.

He thought he knew what direction she was headed. He was following her sounds, she made a lot of them. He knew he was getting closer.

For a moment he was sure he caught a glimpse of her. He sprinted toward the shape. Perhaps a hundred yards away, probably less. In the distance, off to his right he heard a thump, a pronounced sound of wood creaking. He kept running toward the shape he'd seen and ignored it.

She closed the door behind her, quietly as she could, with shaky hands. Her face was flushed and her body filled with adrenaline. Unbeknownst to her, she was remarkably close to a heart attack, but hovered on the verge by the will of someone or something else. Perhaps something greater than she or Robert.

Her breathing came in ragged gasps, her lips and tongue dry as parchment, her face and ears hot. She prayed on her hands and knees like she hadn't done in years. She wished for her rosary, then her husband. Even her children.

She looked up and saw the green fiberglass roof of the shed glowing in the light of the moon. It filled her with dread for some reason.

She could hear her stalker crashing around in the orchard, through huge bunches of trees nearly naked of leaves. She looked

around in the little shed for any sort of protection, any sort of weapon that could help her to survive the man's attack if, no, *when* it came.

Robert realized that the noises the woman had been making and the thunderous sound of her running over thousands of dead leaves was gone. It only took him a moment to decide to go toward the sounds he'd heard just moments before while chasing some shadow. He slowed his pace, taking a leisurely stroll.

She could find nothing of practical use. There were long poles with grippy things on the ends like ice cream scoops, and a lawn mower. Bunches of bags and sacks containing things she couldn't see. The only thing remotely useful was the broken end of one of the long sticks. It actually looked more like a misplaced broom handle. The wooden end was jagged from being separated from its rightful location, and if used to poke at someone it could be very painful, but it would take a lot of effort to run someone through with it. She supposed it would have to do.

He saw the little storage shed and knew instinctively that she was within. Odd and a little ironic that she would meet her doom in a place very similar to where most of his prized victims did. Enclosed, nearly no light, he thought of his 'it' back home and smiled.

He stalked quietly around the little building, looking for windows, loose boards, anything that would allow her the opportunity to get out while he went in. There were none. Just the one door with the hasp hanging freely, swinging in the wind, lock still locked, white wood exposed in splinters where the hasp had been torn from the door. He grinned. This was easy . . . and fun. Perhaps he'd try something like this again. Not to mention it the moon was a perfect back drop for his kill. He smiled amidst the blood on his face and arms from his broken nose. Then a shake of his head. Not so bad for a nights work.

She heard something just outside the door. It was barely audible, the sound of a couple of brittle, dry leaves crunching, but it was enough to let her in on the fact that someone was outside the door. Her friend Mr. Cleaver, she was sure.

She had gone from fear to anger, the stick in her hand making her just confident enough to be angry. She prepared to swing the thing with all of her might, to take the top of his sick head off if she could. She unconsciously grinned a horrible grin.

He reached for the door and realized he'd left the cleaver behind in the car. For a moment he was going to run and get it, then remembered his boot knife. Nice 5 inch Buck. It would do.

He reached for the door and pushed it inward. It swung to the right and didn't creak at all. It was nearly pitch black inside except for the unnerving glow of the green fiberglass roof. He took a step in.

He heard the whoosh of the stick the moment she took her swing. That didn't mean he had time to get entirely out of the way, however.

He half stepped to his left and the full force of the blow was caught by his jaw rather than the side of his head.

He felt two of his teeth come loose and one go through his left cheek, and felt his jaw crack. Crack not break, although it was just as painful. He fell into the wall next to him.

She came at him with lightning quickness for a woman her age and weight. She probably could have broken his back by sitting on him but instead she took another swing at him.

He could feel it coming and knew in his prone position that he was going to be hit again whether he liked it or not, he tilted to his side and made sure it didn't hit him in the head though. It caught him high up on his left arm, just below the joint at his shoulder, and it shot fire through his entire arm and side. She would have been a good baseball player.

She pulled back to swing again and he scrambled up. She swung through open air. He punched her in her bleeding leg, the one he'd hit with the cleaver, with all of his might. She fell to her knees.

In the instant that she heard the sound of her kneecaps hitting the concrete of the shed floor Mary realized her life was over. She was exhausted. There wasn't enough energy left in her to fight. For a moment she considered just closing her eyes and shutting the

world out. At that point she was sure that it wouldn't be a problem. Then, just as quickly, all within the space of a second, she decided that she wouldn't go out without some sort of protest. All she could manage to do was scream.

Then Robert was on his feet and kicked her in her substantial gut. She puked. It made him angrier. He kicked her in the chest. She fell to the floor on her back. He kicked her in the side. She opened her mouth and began to scream again, but he didn't hear a sound over the one he suddenly realized was coming from his own mouth. A scream of primal rage and anger pouring from his throat, so strong that he could actually feel the inside of it bleeding. He smiled and quieted himself so he could hear her sweet cries.

She rolled over onto her stomach. He jumped on her, the small of her back. It broke. Her legs immediately went dead and she wet herself. Her screaming ceased and she stopped moving.

He rummaged through bags, ran his hands over the floor for a moment before finding the makeshift weapon she'd used on him just moments before. He hit her in the back over and over, until all he saw was a red haze.

Next, he found himself in his car driving back toward Flagstaff. He would need to take care of his jaw. The mother of the 'it' could wait. He didn't like it but his health and safety came before pleasure. Besides, the old woman had proved to be a very effective release.

Back in the little storage shed, the body of Mary Walters, deceased, drooled her last drops of saliva onto the dirt floor of the building. Behind her, amongst the anonymous bags, sat a business card covered by a film of dust put there by its owner in a frantic search for her makeshift weapon. It read:

U.S. GEOLOGICAL SERVICE, ARIZONA

ANY QUESTIONS PLEASE CALL:

_____ AT _____

(NAME) (#)

The name and number slots were blank. On the back it had a handwritten blurb which said "Vondralin, Portland, Dec. 28"

Although the card would be found during the investigation of the woman's death when the body was found a week later, the card would be walked upon several times, smearing the handwritten message almost to the point of illegibility.

CHAPTER 18

January 15

It had been over ten days since she had received the information from the girls concerning the license plate of the car that Teresa said was driven by the man who took Charlotte away.

When Officer Michaels had called her on the sixth, she had spoken to him about what the little girls had said, about Charlotte and the car. She made no mention of their father.

Officer Michaels said, with a statement from the girls, and the information on the license plates that Rachael had given him, the police could open the case wide up, and get the F.B.I. fully involved.

She told him about AGENT Fitzgerald. He didn't say much but she had a feeling he was filing away everything she said, and although she didn't know why she didn't mind. The man had been very helpful. Maybe it was all a part of the process.

None of it wound up helping though.

The Rolands had disappeared. The mother and the two girls were nowhere to be found. Why they hadn't returned to their house was beyond Rachael's knowledge, but she had expected them to call; not run away. No such luck. They were gone, and in turn the only witnesses to her daughters kidnapping were gone as well. However, more lousy news was right around the corner. There were no license plates in the state of Arizona bearing the letters, 'Big Rock' or even 'Big Roc.' Her one hope seemed to be slowly dying. Officer Michaels called her everyday now, to keep her updated. Not so much on what he knew, but rather all of what he

still didn't. She did appreciate the effort and attention to her situation. Rachael didn't know that he was doing all of the investigating he was capable of on his own time and money.

All of it seemed to be for nothing and now nearly three weeks after the disappearance of her daughter, she was no closer than she had been that first day. She had information but it seemed to be useless.

She had stopped going out every night looking in the same old area for Charlotte. The snow was gone now and although it was still cold, the whiteness of holiday winter had passed by. She had burned her copy of 'The Stand' as a sort of ritual sacrifice, swearing to whatever unseen spirits and gods that would listen that she would never read another word from any book in the world as long as she lived if only they'd bring Charlotte back to her right then. Of course it hadn't worked and she regretted having burnt the book.

She hadn't really even left the house since she stopped her nightly searches three evenings earlier. She had started dipping into her store of alcohol above the stove, a little too hard. She knew it was dangerous considering her background but she wasn't trying to escape her past like her mother, instead she was just trying to make it through the horrible, lonely present. Rachael was trying to help herself with the fact that it was most likely she'd never see her daughter alive again. It was a purge and a binge.

When Officer Michaels called at just after 10 in the morning on Tuesday, Rachael was already drunk. In fact she was speaking in slurry, slushy sentences that were indecipherable over the phone. She had hung up on him in the middle of a sentence with a muddy 'Goohby.' He was on patrol anyway, so he decided to go check up on her. The daytime problems never got too heavy until around lunch.

As soon as he came to her front door he knew that she hadn't been out for a couple of days. It might have been the intricate and wide spread spider web with several small bugs caught in it that gave it away. That wasn't good, she was probably depressed.

Wesley had been able to tell, over the phone, that she was most of three sheets to the wind. Combinations like that tended to get people dead by suicide or stupidity more often than he cared to admit.

He rang the doorbell and was sure he'd get no answer. But, contrary to what he imagined, she came immediately to the door.

She opened it, and walked away from it. If he hadn't seen her peephole in the door darken for just a moment, he would have thought she had opened the thing not caring who was outside.

He swam through the spiderwebs, and opened the screen door letting himself in. Not once did she say a word.

He stepped in, took a few steps, and found himself looking at a completely different living room than he had seen when he'd first been here not quite three weeks earlier. He turned to his right, to get a full look at the room.

The curtains were closed and only the light of the television lit the room. The shadows of overturned furniture and knick knacks strewn about the floor made it look as if an overgrown child had gone berserk in the room. Even the pictures that had been hanging on the walls were torn down or hung awkwardly, except for the one of her husband, daughter, and herself.

Rachael sat in the recliner, legs up, a glass gleaming from the light of the television in one hand, and a smoldering cigarette in the other. Quickly, she slammed down the remains of what was in her glass and set it in between her legs. She reached down along side her chair and picked up a bottle. He couldn't see what kind it was, but he knew what it did. She poured it into the glass in her lap, taking a drag off of the cigarette at the same time. It sickened him and he was very tempted walk out right then or take the bottle from her hands and smash it against the wall. He did neither and he didn't speak. He turned on the light.

He began to turn the furniture over and put it back in the right places, as near as he could recall. Wesley looked at her. It was the first time he had since he'd turned the lights on. Her face was dirty with ashes. Dozens of streaks ran through the smudges on

her face, from tears he was sure. The ashtray next to her on the only standing end table was overflowing. A small mound of butts lay on the floor amidst three bottles. Her hair was tangled and mussed, her clothes covered with crumbs and things he couldn't identify. And now that he tried he was quite sure he could smell her. She puffed absently on her cigarette and drank down the remainder of her glass that had been full less than five minutes before.

He stopped putting things where they belonged and clicked on his radio. He informed his dispatcher that he was taking his lunch and would be off the line, unless an emergency came up, for the next hour. Rachael never moved.

He took off his belt and draped it over the arm of the couch. It was then that she gave him a look. It wasn't a kind one, it was hateful and full of venom, he ignored it. He stood in the same spot, undid the cuffs of his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. She was now staring at him with eyes like daggers. He ignored it.

Wesley went over and grabbed her by the shoulders to stand her up. She slapped him across the face. It surprised him but he shook it off. He spoke softly but with authority.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I'm gonna' help you clean yourself up a bit."

She shook her head but relaxed a bit.

"Come on," he said and stood her up. He began to push her toward the bathroom that he'd only seen and used once. She began to resist him, like a child refusing to go to bed.

He picked her up, arms around her waist, and carried her in.

He sat her down on the toilet seat, (which he noticed, with astonishment, was up), looked in cabinets, found two big towels, and a wash cloth, and began to clean her up.

First, he brushed her off, cleaned off all that he could of her clothing. Then he washed her bare feet, her hands and arms, then her face. She cried all the while. Finally, he washed her hair. It was long and beautiful when it was clean.

When her impromptu bath was all done and she resembled

some sort of human being, he spoke to her in a calm even tone, making sure she acknowledged him.

"Mrs. Vondralin, I can't clean you up any more than I have. You're gonna' have to take a shower and do whatever else you need to, then you're gonna ride around with me for the rest of the day while I patrol. We'll get you some food, sobered up, and then we'll come back here and see what else we can do for you. So you get cleaned up. Sound good?," she didn't react, "SOUND GOOD?," he said again, looking directly into her face. She nodded.

"I'm gonna' stand at the door here, back to you, while you get fixed up. At least till' you finish showering. I can't say I trust you to be careful right now." Her eyes flashed anger, distrust.

"Can I trust you to not hurt yourself if I leave you alone to get ready?," he asked genuinely. Again, she nodded. He left the room. She stripped and got into the shower.

Twenty minutes later she emerged from the bathroom in a terry cloth robe. He was at the bend in the hallway, close enough to get to her in time if she decided to do anything, and far enough away to not be threatening. She was stunning, even in a robe, and he felt bad for even noticing considering the circumstances.

He checked in with dispatch 10 minutes later, telling them he was on patrol near her house, and surrounding areas. It was a little out of the way but not out of the ordinary.

After another half hour she was done. Dressed in beat up jeans, a big sweater, hair tied up in a bandanna, it was obvious she didn't want to be noticed. She wouldn't meet his eyes. He thought that was odd considering the looks she'd been giving him when he was getting ready to clean her up. Maybe she was sobering up a bit and knew how foolish she was acting. He didn't ask or make a statement. When he spoke it was business like and she answered in kind.

"Mrs. Vondralin, do you know where your keys are?"

"Yes. In the kitchen."

"Could you go get them so we can lock up your house before we leave?"

"Yes," she did.

Wesley retrieved her jacket from the coat closet by the front door, and helped her put it on, she didn't seem to care what it was. Then he made sure the place was locked up tight.

He was breaking a rule by allowing her to ride in the car. Any touring with a patrolman, either solo or with partner, was supposed to be cleared with a departmental supervisor before happening. He didn't care, about the rule that is. People were always more important than rules. 24 hour rule, no riding with a patrolman unless cleared rule, rule, rule, rule. He was tired of them, they tended to hurt more than help nowadays.

He stopped at a restaurant off of Fremont street, a little Szechwan place that he frequented, and ordered her some Chicken Teriyaki and white rice. Not too difficult for the stomach, considering she was still very much under the influence of alcohol, and it would hopefully speed her sobriety along a bit.

The day ended, thankfully, uneventfully for him. She had eaten about half of the food he'd gotten for her before throwing up. In the car.

He'd stopped at a gas station they were passing and let her clean up. Remarkably, she came back refreshed and ate the rest of the food without problem. He was impressed, usually people don't take too kindly to eating after . . . regurgitating.

At quarter to four, fifteen minutes before his shift ended, he dropped Rachael at her house and told her he'd be back in a half hour. She nodded but didn't speak. As a matter of fact, she'd only spoken twice since they'd left her house that morning. Once when she said, "Oh no," just before she'd thrown up, and "OK," when he told her he was going to take her home at quarter to four.

He turned over his car to the garage, showered and dressed quickly and went directly to her house. It was no trouble at all, he liked helping her, taking care of her. He thought he could get used to it, if she'd let him.

He arrived at her house, walked to the door, and rang the bell. She answered quickly, as she had the first time.

“Officer Michaels, I—”

“You can call me Wes if you want.”

“—appreciate your help today but I’m fine now and I’d like to—”

She was hiding her right hand behind the door and her breath smelled of whiskey.

“—get to cleaning up my house, so—”

He pushed her out of the way gently as possible and entered the house. She dropped the glass in her right hand and began to slap him. In the face, the arms, the chest. He didn’t move. She kept going, it hurt but he didn’t react.

One too many and one too hard and his lower lip began to bleed. Just a trickle and she saw it before he felt it.

She fell to the floor on her knees into a puddle of whiskey and began to sob. He knelt down next to her and pulled her to his shoulder as she cried. He stood her up, then picked her up while she cried all the while.

He carried her to the bedroom and laid her in her bed. Wesley held her to him as she cried, he attempted to lay her down but she held him close. Ten minutes later she was asleep on his shoulder. He laid her down, took off her shoes, and covered her up. Then he went about the task of cleaning up her house.

CHAPTER 19

Robert had been home for quite sometime. It had been days since his failed trip to get the mother of the ‘it’. His jaw, examined by a doctor at an on the road emergency room, turned out to have a hairline fracture. Only a very deep bruise adorned his arm. Battle scars, he thought with a grin. Robert had, of course, explained it away as bar fight injuries.

The ‘it’ that he had with him right now had proven to be a rather resourceful and resilient one. While he had been gone she had tried to use the can opener as a hammer to break the lock on the door. It was a tough Schlage lock though and took the abuse. He had expected that sort of action, with the cans even, but not what she had tried besides that. She had tried to use the can tops, with their ragged edges, as saws.

The door was just under two inches thick and the lock mechanism was about 8 inches worth of metal to saw around. She’d managed to get about 3/4 of inch deep around the whole thing. If he’d been gone as long as he had planned she would have most certainly gotten out. When he’d let her out to clean the space she was kept in, she wandered around in the dark swinging one of the can tops around in a wide arc trying to get at him, cut him. If he had not been leery of her, due to past experiences, she might have gotten him, but he could see easily, he was used to working in the dark.

He’d cleaned out the space he kept the ‘it’ in and shuffled her back into it but not before she managed to give him a long, shallow cut along the length of his arm. He’d broken her nose for that. He had a feeling she wouldn’t try it again, he thought with a twisted smile, he’d taken her little weapons away from her.

Except for the one she'd stuffed in the back of her pants.

He was worried about things now, though. Just yesterday someone, a police someone, had called the main office in Flagstaff about a murder in Southern California. Of course, he knew what it was about, BUT, he didn't know how they'd traced it to Arizona. They didn't have any ideas about who'd done it and they refused to give out any details about it. He thought it was probably because they didn't want to take a chance on alerting the person responsible if that person was there. There had been three people on vacation at the same time as him, and one of them was just as single as he was. He was not as well covered as he would have liked to have been but he was sure that whatever connected the U.S. Geological Service in Arizona to a murder in Southern California, (they had refused to give the exact location of the murder), was most likely pretty weak. Still, it was unnerving and it did bother him whether he wanted to admit it to himself or not.

He considered getting rid of the 'it' quickly and selectively remodeling his house in order to prevent any sort of trouble should someone question him. Yes, he had considered it, for about 36 seconds.

CHAPTER 20

"What the hell does it say, Larry?," the big man with hair protruding from the open neck of his shirt asked, his feet propped up on a desk which obviously wasn't his.

"It looks like, uh, 'Very fin Porlan D 28,' whatever that might mean."

Mr. Hair looked at the only other man in the room and spoke sarcastically, obviously meaning to rile 'Larry.' "Some fuckin' forensics expert."

The third man laughed.

Larry's face soured. He stood and turned to Mr. Hair and although he was nearly 6 inches shorter his stance was intimidating enough to make Mr. Hair take a step back.

"Mike, this is your ball game. You want me to find out what it says on the damn card, you let me have it. There won't be anything left of it but I guaran-goddamn-tee you I can find out what was written there."

"It's still evidence, Larry. I can't let you tear it up till' the initial investigation is over."

"That could take weeks, months."

Mike, better known as Mr. Hair, nodded.

The third man spoke, his voice soft. "We don't really need it for the investigation, Mike. It's just a business card. For all we know it could have been there for months."

"No, I know it means something. I'm not sure why but I know it means something."

"Guess you won't know WHAT for quite a bit of time, huh?," Larry said with a grin empty of humor.

Mr. Hair looked at the ceiling for a moment and then his shoes.

“Do what you’ve gotta’ do, Larry. I’ll check up on it later on in the week. I’ve got a photocopy, it’s as good as that thing I suppose.”

Larry nodded.

“C’mon Greg, let’s go,” Mr. Hair said to the third man as they went out the door. It shut behind them and the sign on it said “515, Forensics, Lawrence Young, L.A.P.D.”

CHAPTER 21

Charlotte thought maybe she was going ‘crazy.’ Only eight years old, and her special and gifted mind had seemingly begun to slowly disintegrate.

She had begun to hear things. Not things that she should be hearing. She could hear her daddy. He was telling her what to do. He had told her to try and hammer the door open. It hadn’t worked. He had told her to use the can tops to cut through the wood. It had been working until the bad man came back. He’d told her to try and cut him, to get him to let her go. She’d cut him but it didn’t make him let her go. Now it seemed that Daddy was telling her to use the can top she had in her pants to cut herself. To cut herself deep before the bad man could hurt her anymore. He had messed up her nose. It had bled a lot but had eventually stopped. Now her nose was always clogged up and hurt. She was hot. She felt like she was going to burn up sometimes. She didn’t understand the thick gooey fluid coming from her nose either. It wasn’t snot. She had looked at it in the little shard of light through the door. It didn’t look, feel, or taste like it either. It was bitter yellow-brown stuff. She felt really bad and was scared out of her wits.

If she’d been only a bit older she might have known the bitter yellow-brown stuff was called ‘pus’ and the reason that she was so hot was because she had a ‘sinus infection’ that left unchecked for long enough could turn into pneumonia and kill her.

CHAPTER 22

When Rachael awoke, in the early hours of the morning on January 16th, she was immediately afraid. It was the sound of the Beatles coming down the hallway and into her room that was unsettling. She NEVER left the music on when she went to bed.

The throbbing in her head left over from her drinking, reminded her rather uncomfortably, that she could have done any number of things that she didn't typically do when sober.

She grasped at her wispy, smoky memories, veiled by alcohol, and tried to recall the last 72 hours. The last 48. The last 24. She remembered the events of the day before in a flash. From the entrance of Officer Michaels into her house, his cleaning her up, throwing up in his car, crying like a baby on his shoulder, then nothing. She assumed she had fallen asleep. She wondered how he knew to come over. She could have done anything in the state she had been in, she supposed.

She tried to stand and felt nauseous, close to vomiting. So, she sat on the edge of her bed, looked at her clock, (which told her it was 4:23), and let her head swim. The music which had scared her at first was now remarkably soothing and her guess was that Officer Michaels, (Had he said to call him Wes?), was the one who had turned the music on before he had left.

After a couple of minutes, she rose. Hating herself for thinking all the while of alcohol which was because she was trying so desperately not to think of Charlotte being gone, perhaps dead. She decided whiskey was the best for this time of day. It would wake her up and numb her mind. She lit a cigarette and stood.

Stalking down the hallway she thought of her last dream of Charlotte. The creaking her neck had made when she'd turned her

head, the dead pallor of her skin. She detoured to the bathroom and left what little bit of food that she had in her stomach behind. When she stood to clean herself, she screamed when she saw Officer Michaels standing in the doorway looking her in the eyes.

The scream startled him and it showed on his face. He spoke, trying to calm her down.

"WHOA! It's all right! I was just picking up your house a bit, I didn't think you'd be up for it when you woke up."

She didn't want to talk, she wanted to get rip roaring drunk again and the fact that for some reason she felt uncomfortable doing that with him around made her cross. He was as good a target as any she supposed.

"Well, I would rather have you out of my house, thank you. It's four in the morning and I'm a mess. I really don't appreciate you being here," she said coldly, angrily. She saw his expression change almost imperceptibly, he was hurt by her tone and her words. That by no means meant she was going to be any kinder.

"So would you please go?!", she said, pushing him with her words.

He turned away, then whatever it was that drove him to become a police officer in the first place, willing to lay down his life for others, prompted him to turn back to her. His expression and voice became authoritative as he spoke.

"Mrs. Vondralin, RACHAEL, you are obviously in a state of mind that wasn't the best to leave you alone in. I didn't and don't intend to do so. I can't stay here without your permission, BUT if I think you're going to hurt yourself or anyone else I can put you in a little thing called Detox. Involuntary, and not very nice, but I'll be sure that you won't do anything rash. You can sue me later," he paused, studying her face, her cold expression, and saw a little softening of the features, he went on. "I'll fix you something to eat if you're hungry."

She shook her head, not liking him, HATING him, but at the same time thankful for someone, ANYONE, trying to help her. Without Charlotte and John she truly felt as if she was nothing

and had nothing to live for. She studied him as she wiped her face with a damp towel, snorting and spitting the rest of the vomit out of her mouth and nose all the while. He didn't talk, just leaned up against the side of the doorway absently studying his fingernails. She spoke cautiously and coldly when she was finished.

"Why do you care? I'm no concern of yours. Surely you have better things to do than to babysit me."

He nodded. No words. It made her mad. She wanted to draw him into an argument.

"WHY?! What do you WANT?," she screamed, her mind skipping tracks from annoyance to absolute rage. At that moment she wanted to kill him. She was shaking subtly, like an earthquake from within, and looking for an object to smash over his head. He saw it, did not react to her anger. He spoke a few sentences that disarmed her rage and resurrected her from the belief that there was only John and Charlotte to believe in.

"My name is Wesley Michaels. You and I both worked for a man named Graham in a small town called Keno in the summer of 1968. I've had a crush on you for over twenty years," he stopped, seemingly afraid of what he was preparing to say, and blushed, "I cleaned the stables for you that first day."

Rachael's jaw dropped. Her hangover prevented her from realizing that she was drooling from the right hand corner of her mouth. Wesley, 'Officer Michaels', had saved her life, in a manner of speaking, long before she knew what it was worth. She wanted to cry, she wanted to scream! Who was he to try to prevent her from getting lost in a bottle? Just because he'd been around once before to pull her ass out of the meat grinder didn't mean he had to be around again! Slowly, she regained the little composure she had to regain and walked into her living room. She sat down and waved him onto to the couch across from him. It was time to hash a few things out, no matter how wrung out she already felt.

After a couple of hours of tentative reminiscing Rachael had returned to reality as much as she could in such a short time. She was aware of how close she'd brought herself to the edge. She could

have died from alcohol poisoning, she couldn't recall eating more than three times in the past three or four days. Her liver was definitely working overtime.

Wesley made her breakfast, explained what he had been doing to help locate Charlotte, and telling her frankly that, although he didn't expect to ever find her, he'd keep looking for as long as she wanted.

She was touched and afraid of the openness with which he expressed himself with. It helped that he hadn't taken advantage of her, nor abused the fragile relationship that they had between them. In fact he had only earned respect in her eyes by not reacting to her slapping attacks upon him with a retaliation.

At just after seven he told her that he had to go into work, to get any info that might have come his way about Charlotte. It was his day off so he wouldn't have to stay. He told her he'd be back when he was finished, he didn't ask.

She didn't want to admit it but she was glad. She was capable of taking care of herself quite well but she needed someone to help her through this time, this immediate time, the loss of her daughter. It hadn't even been a month but it seemed like an eternity.

After he left, Rachael went to her liquor cabinet, which she had stocked full sometime during her drunken binge, and took each bottle out in turn and set them out on the counter. Ten full bottles. There had never been that many full bottles of liquor in the house, not even on Christmas eve when John had friends home from the firm. She decided that there would never be that many bottles of liquor in the house again. One by one she began to pour them down the sink. When it was all said and done only one was left, an unopened bottle of inexpensive wine. She told herself that she would only open it when and if she ever found Charlotte. She put it back up in the cabinet.

CHAPTER 23

February 1

Robert had decided to leave. He had moved the 'it' to another room. A bedroom. One of the three upstairs. It was a place no other 'it' had ever been and if he could prevent it no other 'it' would be again. However, 'it' had cut 'its' right wrist rather badly and it had bled a river of purplish-red blood. 'It' would have most likely died if 'it' hadn't passed out leaning against the door, a puddle of blood leaking out from under it. Some perverted sense of honor pushed him to keep her alive until he had finished with its mother.

Also, she was breathing oddly, as if gargling, and yellowish brown mucus, thick and evil looking, dribbled from her nose. He decided that was nothing to worry about. Just a stuffed nose.

So he had taken the time and effort to prevent 'it' from dying from loss of blood. He wanted so badly to draw out the mother, but he wasn't sure he could and for some odd reason he knew he'd have to keep the 'it' alive to do it. He wanted this 'it' dead more than any other before but he knew when the time for killing came, and this wasn't it. If the mother and the 'it' were both there the deaths would be a million times as sweet.

'It' was tied to a bed, with 'its' right arm immobilized by a modified arm/shoulder brace. 'It' also had a makeshift water dispenser, similar to a hamster or rabbit watering bottle, hanging over 'its' head. Food would be a treat when he returned. He didn't intend to leave her any.

He was flying out of Flagstaff to Portland under a false name and would arrive that night. It would be at most a three day trip.

He had to be back to work on Tuesday and didn't want to raise any suspicions. He would bring the mother, he wanted her to come so badly, and in fact, he just wanted her, he didn't understand the feeling or why he had it, but for the first time with an 'it' or a parent, he wanted in a physical way. Perhaps, when she was dead. He grinned cruelly at the thought. Humming to himself, Robert went out the door, clutching a single small bag in his right hand, his long hair combed nicely, covering his tattered ear.

He strolled leisurely to his car, gently opening the door and placing his bag inside; all the while thinking about the 'its' soon to be unfortunate parent. In anticipation his drive to the airport was quicker than normal.

Flight 1369, departing from Flagstaff at approximately 3:45 in the afternoon and arriving in Portland, Oregon at approximately 7:30 was two hours late.

Robert stepped off of the plane at just after 9:00 with a smile on his face. The majority of the other passengers emerging from the tunnel from the plane with him were wearing various frowns and looks of constipation. He thought of the things he had to do in the next 36 hours. So many things, so little time.

Robert checked into a rundown little hotel about as far away from the mother as he wanted to get. A little place called the Knickerbocker, which had a sign proclaiming proudly, "Weekly and HOURLY rates!!!"

It was not by any means an establishment where visiting NBA teams or rock stars stayed when they had an engagement in the growing metropolis of Portland. It was, however, a place where cash and a few small lies prevented any questions or identification. The clerk and owner of the small establishment, an Arabic man, wished him good luck as he gave him the keys.

He emptied his bag of its goodies and a single change of clothes then looked over everything greedily, not knowing what to do first or for that matter what to do at all. A picture of the 'it' sleeping, close enough to look normal, to prevent notice of any surrounding features of the room or bed 'it' was one of his goodies. It could

have been taken anytime. Only the mother would know it had come from somewhere else, someONE else besides her. He had carefully put it in a plastic baggie, removing all identifying marks, and preventing any sort of fingerprints. He had her telephone number and a little twelve second speech he wanted to give her. A lock of the 'it's' hair, another one of his goodies, and the clincher, a picture of the 'it' in the closet, passed out in a puddle of her own blood, which he would only show to the mother personally, and be gone before she could know what the hell to do about it. He couldn't allow her to get a hold of that one, it would validate the fact that her . . . uh . . . daughter was taken and put a lot of heat on the trail. Couldn't have that.

The picture of the 'it' on the bed, he'd use that one first.

He arrived early in the morning the next day. He'd been working up his nerve all night. He was remarkably anxious and scared, at the same time. At just after 6:00 a.m. he placed a carefully kept picture in the mailbox, one of the 'it' belonging to the mother within.

He imagined he could almost smell her, feel her beneath him, hot blood boiling out from her neck over his right hand, gripping her torn jugular vein. Robert wanted to smash every bone in her body. Peeling the flesh from them first would be nice but how long would he be able to keep her alive that way? Tied down with barb wire he could masturbate all over her. Make her touch him.

He felt very close to orgasm.

He wasn't sure what this would do, how she would react, but he was sure that it would lead her nowhere in terms of finding him, he had developed the film himself.

Later. Later, he would take the first real step toward making her come to him. For now, the picture would be just enough to keep her in a state of fear, confusion, and irrationality so that she would come running to find her 'it.'

He glided away quietly and slowly, strolling down the block and around the corner to where his stolen car was parked. This time no young girl was there to witness his arrival or departure.

Robert took time during the day to explore the city of Portland. He wanted to be sure to know what places there were to run and hide in the event someone, somehow, caught up with him.

Downtown was a remarkably beautiful and very populated area. A huge statue of a woman holding a trident stood on a building near City Hall. It turned out to be the second largest statue in the United States, called 'Portlandia.' Just one of many things he'd learned while researching this place as a possible hunting ground.

Stores, theatres, a college, a mall, and a gorgeous waterfront completed the scenery. So much to see and enjoy, except for a person who looked only for hiding spots, dark holes, and possible victims. The Mojave desert was just as beautiful to him as the wonderful city in which he had chosen his last victim. A jail cell would have been as appealing to him. It was only the kill that added color.

Downtown Portland had many places which could be used to find new victims. There was the waterfront, teeming with young boys and girls, Portland State University, ripe with college freshmen just waiting to turn 18. So many murders and not enough time to commit them.

The day passed slowly amidst his imagined kills. At 5:00 in the evening he decided to make the call. It was the next card for him to play. It was an ace. His next one, the picture of the daughter passed out in a pool of her own blood, was the joker, the wild card on which his whole hand was based. Perhaps it was his ace in the hole.

CHAPTER 24

Ring. Phone ringing. She came out of her first non-alcohol induced sleep without a throbbing headache for the first time in days, just a nap, but a good one. She grasped for the phone, missed and pushed it farther away. She sat up and looked for it through her sleep hazed eyes. The dusky dimness of oncoming night making it that much harder to see. Finally, she got it in her hand and put it to her ear.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. Vondralin, I have 6 sentences to say to you that will take just over thirty seconds, be damn sure you listen and understand.

I have your daughter.

Do not attempt to contact the police about this call or I will kill her, I will know if you do, trust me.

She is alive and well although she did hurt herself quite badly by cutting herself with the top of a soup can.

I will contact you to discuss options for her return.

I do not want money or materials or sex.

You will follow my instructions if and when I call in the future to give them.

Be prepared to leave your house, the city, the state, or the country at the receipt of my call.”

She was stunned awake, angry, horrified, invigorated.

“Who the hell are you?! Give m-”

The phone went dead.

Robert smiled.

Rachael screamed.

CHAPTER 25

He was pleased. He was calling from two blocks away, from a pay phone, wearing gloves. He hopped in his car and drove to the end of her block, parked and waited. She would leave soon, do something to relieve her anxiety. Robert knew how it worked. The method was practiced, tried and true.

A half hour later it happened. She got into her car and drove away from the house. He waited until she passed him, turned right, and was going the speed limit until he put his car in gear and made chase.

He was already wearing a ski-mask and gloves. Along with the stolen car and the quickness which he planned to strike her with, it would set the whole thing up for the future. Of course, he had expected to go quickly with the old woman he'd met up with outside Los Angeles on the road between Flagstaff and Portland. She had prevented his trip north entirely with her futile resistance. The mother could destroy his trip home if he wasn't more careful with her than he had been with the old woman. He noted it to himself.

Moments later, driving down a road named 'Columbia Boulevard,' he began to wonder where she was going. She didn't seem to be heading toward anyplace. In fact, although he didn't know the area, it seemed like she was just driving randomly.

He backed off just a little bit, a tad concerned now. She followed the road until it turned into another road. They passed a baseball park, a NAPA auto parts store, and then, suddenly, she turned left, sharply, tires squealing on the wet pavement. Mrs. Vondralin slid to a stop in the driveway of a seemingly unimportant house.

He crept up behind her in his car. Caution was vital at this point in the game, just in case someone was watching. Getting caught could be bad . . . very bad. She seemed to be crying like a loon, fighting to get her seatbelt off, open the door and smoke a cigarette at the same time. He wanted to kill, rape, destroy, love, and hate her in the same way. He focused himself. Patience was the important thing here and he had to act before she got more than a couple of feet from her car.

Her door opened, he stopped abruptly. She waved at him, dusk and moisture on the car window obviously impairing her vision to the point that she couldn't see that he was wearing a ski-mask.

He was out of the car, picture in hand, and around to her in no more than two seconds. She saw him instinctively knowing who he was. Her jaw dropped, her cigarette falling to the pavement, and her crying halted entirely. She started to speak or scream. He quickly held a finger up to his mouth in a gesture for quiet and then stroked the same finger across his throat in a cutting motion. She got the picture and held back whatever verbalizations she might have been considering.

He took the picture from his pocket, shoved it in her face, and watched as her soul writhed within her. He thought that he saw a piece of her die right then. He felt himself climax. Quickly, he put the picture away. He went back to the car slowly. She simply stared, not moving, stunned by fear, realization, and whatever else motivated her in her desire to get her daughter back. As he got in, he said the one thing he had to.

"Not a word, to anyone, not a word."

And with that he got in the car and sped off. He calculated that he had approximately 4 minutes before she got inside the house, explained the situation, called the police, and they sent people over into her area to check the situation out. He sped back the way they had come, getting as far as he could while staying under the speed limit. At the four minute mark, he parked the car in the nearest available spot after turning off of 'Columbia' and

went looking for a pay phone to call a cab. The ski-mask and gloves found a permanent resting place in a puddle of mud where they wouldn't be found for nearly four months.

15 minutes and 20 dollars later he arrived at his hotel.

7:30 in the morning on February 3, he was at the Portland Airport, boarding his flight home. All taken care of in plenty of time to be back for work.

All was going well, according to plan. The day was very productive. Robert only wished there was some way to hurry things to their conclusion.

CHAPTER 26

Rachael walked like a zombie up the steps. Her jaw hung limply from her skull and she looked as if she'd just gone through the washing machine. The drizzle floating on the cool wind only added to her look of near insanity. It took a Herculean effort for her to raise her hand to knock on the door.

She looked at Wesley for no more than a second before she started to cry.

She fell to her knees and curled up into a little ball and he picked her up, took her to his bed, laid her down and sat with her until she fell asleep. It could become a habit, watching her sleep, and not one that would ever be difficult for him.

Through her sobs and fits of screaming into the pillows on his bed she managed to communicate to him what had happened. Although, as much as he hated to say it, he didn't believe a single word.

It wouldn't have made sense for the guy to come back, want nothing, show her a picture of her daughter, cut and bloody, and then give her a picture of her sleeping peacefully. Well, maybe part of it would make sense if it had only been a couple of days since she disappeared. However, it was going on two months. He had a feeling the whole thing was dreamed up in her head as a last ditch effort to avoid the fact that her daughter might be dead. Still, he would liked to have met the little girl and if possible he would have wished her back, just to make Rachael happy. It just wasn't in his hands though.

He went to the kitchen to finish making the vegetable soup he'd been preparing.

It turned out there was a little validity to her story after all. It came to light after a calmer and more detailed talk between Rachael

and Wes the next morning. A couch curled Wes made a quick phone call to the station. After a couple minute wait, for the license plate check, the car turned out to be a stolen vehicle. A brown sedan, Chrysler, just like she had told him the night before.

He was still skeptical, although he knew something was up. Maybe, some loser with nothing better to do got a hold of the story about her in the Oregonian and decided to make a game of it. To torture the woman for fun. That seemed more reasonable. Pictures could be faked, doctored. Any moron with a computer could superimpose a face onto a photograph. So, the sick-sadist-wanting-to-cause-distraught-woman-anguish idea caught in Wes's mind and even though he did his best to seem sympathetic to Rachael and her belief about the situation. He really didn't believe in her idea any more than he did Santa Claus.

The sad thing was that none of this warranted any further investigation. No car was found, (it had been stolen, after having been stolen by McPherson, from where it was left), no proof of any encounter with any such man as she described could be documented due to the sad but true fact that no one had seen the incident. There were no fingerprints on the photograph of her daughter that she insisted was from him. Even though she admitted the alleged suspect never mentioned such a thing. Wesley dusted the thing three times and every print matched the ones he had her make a card of. There was no reason for more manpower to be put on the case of her daughters disappearance. In fact, they were talking about cutting back the three men assigned to the case to one. No F.B.I. agents contacted her and the police had other things to be concerned with. Growing gang violence, a rising murder rate, and an increase in prostitution.

It was February 22 when it all began to happen, to fall into place. For Robert and, in an odd sense, for Rachael.

Valentine's Day had passed with a nice dinner from Wes and a lessening of the ever present anxiety in her mind about Charlotte. She was beginning to agree with Wes, even though it hurt like hell. It probably was some prankster who had played a cruel joke

on her and it was very possible that Charlotte would never be coming home. She doubted she would have listened to, let alone begun to accept any such thing from anyone else besides Wes. His suggestion and belief that she would blow up and leave on him made it that much easier to accept. He was a kind man and would probably be easy to fall for if it wasn't for the fact that her daughter always occupied her mind.

On February 22, her mindset was torn apart and shifted to its position of paranoia, fear, and anger where it would stay until the whole situation came to a head for better or worse.

She received the call at 3:30 am. She groped groggily for the phone.

She answered a hoarse and disoriented "Hello?," and was jolted wide awake by the sound on the other end of the phone.

"Mommy?," She heard Charlotte whisper quiveringly on the other end of the line.

Her heart broke with the sound of her voice. It was weak, husky, and whispery. She was obviously sick.

"Charlotte? Where are you?," she said with a remarkable calm coming over her, shock perhaps.

"Mommy?," the girl asked again.

"CHARLOTTE!," she screamed.

"Calm down lady," the familiar voice said, "it's time for you to listen, not talk."

"YOU BASTARD," she roared, the calm disappearing, "WHERE IS MY DAUGHTER!?"

He laughed like a child on the other end of the line. She began to cry. She was silently sobbing when he spoke again.

"I certainly hope you're done with your little tirade because it would be very easy for me to hang up and see to it that you never lay eyes on this little one again."

"I'm sorry," Rachael whimpered, the words tasting bitter, angry, and untrue.

"Good. Now for the business at hand. I'm going to give you the opportunity to get your daughter back—"

"I'll give you all the money I have, my car, whatever—"

"I don't want or need your money, in fact, money has absolutely nothing to do with it."

Rachael was stunned into silence. All along, somewhere in the back of her mind she always envisioned the situation being like all the ones she'd seen on television over the course of her life. The kidnapper would eventually ask for money, she'd give it, and she'd get her daughter back. Then, the police would catch the kidnapper and give her back the ransom. However, three times she'd either seen or spoken to this man who had her daughter, and he wanted no money. It didn't make sense. Of course, none of it really did.

"You will leave, two days from now, for Seattle, Washington. You will tell no one, besides those you would normally talk to, BUT tell them you're going on vacation or to a relatives house. If you tell them about this call or going to Seattle because I've instructed you to, I assure you I'll find out and you'll never see this little one again. Understood?"

"Yes," again a reluctant and opposite statement than she would have liked to have made.

"Good. You will drive to Seattle, go to the airport, pick-up a rental car from the Budget car rental counter at approximately seven in the evening. Further instructions will be there at the counter, in an envelope from Fred Bullock for you. Just ask if there's a message from a Fred Bullock for you," he paused, letting it sink in, "and, that's not my real name so don't run off telling the police. I'll find out if you make a stink. Do you understand all that?"

She nodded, realized he couldn't hear a nod, and said "Yes."

"Okay. The final thing you need to know is that you should pack for a long trip. You may not be home for quite sometime," he laughed, why Rachael didn't know, but it was an empty, evil laugh.

"Whatever," she sighed and worked up her courage. He spoke again.

"Any questions?"

"No. Put Charlotte back on the phone."

"No, I'm afraid I can't do that."

She was furious but she was going to push it. She had to be sure it was her, that she was still alive and that the madman who had her hadn't just taped her saying 'mommy' a couple of times and played it back over the phone.

"Either put her on or I'm not leaving this fucking house until the second coming. I want to be sure that she's not dead."

"She's not dead, I assure you, but she could wind up that way rather easily if you don't watch yourself."

She thought he was going to hang up then, that he wouldn't put her on, then she heard the raspy breath she'd heard coming out of the phone moments earlier.

"Mommy?"

"Yes, honey. Are you . . . are you okay?," she felt herself starting to cry. She struggled against it. She had to be strong for Charlotte, especially now.

"No. I'm sick," the girl said with a miserable snort.

"I love you, Charlotte. Mommy will be there soon."

"Mommy, please help me. I wanna come home."

"I know. I know."

"I love you, Momm—"

"Be in Seattle on the 24th. Or sayonara."

The line went dead and Rachael screamed like a woman possessed.

The next day Wes came over, as was becoming the routine, and she treated him like complete and utter shit. A knock on the door and she opened it with a jerk, walking away from it so that he could let himself in.

He came in and watched as she walked down the hallway out of his sight. With a shrug of his shoulders he forgot it and sat down on the couch in the living room.

After twenty minutes of sitting alone he decided that she most likely wasn't in the mood for conversation or had fallen and could no longer get to her feet.

He walked down the hallway to her open bedroom door.

She was packing a suitcase, cigarette dangling from her lips, another dying in an ashtray across the room.

"Where are YOU going?," he asked, trying to sound flippant, but coming off more like he was jealous she was going somewhere without him, which wasn't far from the truth.

"I'm going to see my cousin Twyla in Seattle. I need to get away."

It sounded half-true. He knew the sound of truth in a person's voice. Being a cop did that to a person, tending to make them cynical, judgmental, and at times remarkably intuitive about a person's honesty. He was sure that she was only telling him part of the story but had no idea how to breach the subject. It, technically, was none of his business.

"Your cousin Twyla, eh? How long since you saw her last?"

"2 years," she said without hesitation.

He frowned. He didn't believe her but he wanted to.

"Do you want me to leave?," he asked her gingerly, afraid of the answer.

For the first time since he'd come in the house, she looked at him. Even tired and haggard she looked like the sun coming up after a long night shift downtown, a welcome sight.

She looked at him and for a moment saw John in him, in his eyes. He really cared about her and it scared her. Only one man had cared about her before, John. Her insane, perverted father, sick grandfather, both cared nothing for her, only for her body, and with John gone she had no one. Still, here he was. He'd prevented her from sinking into death by alcohol, he'd listened to all of her crying and had done all he could to help her find her daughter, to no avail. She hated to admit it to herself, because she felt like she was pissing on John's grave, but she cared about him, quite possibly was falling in love with him.

She wasn't sure that she'd live to see him again. Somehow, she knew that she might not be making the trip home at the end of her journey.

She stood up, walked over to him, wrapped her arms around

him, holding him, hugging him, so thankful that someone cared.

"No, I don't want you to leave. I'm just not sure what I want or what my life is about anymore. Just give me some time. Okay?"

He nodded. He was stunned that she had even touched him. It made him feel like he was 12 years old.

Two hours later, packing done and every word of small talk exhausted, the two of them went out into the living room and sat down.

Wes worked up his courage and decided to tell her that he thought she was lying. She beat him to the punch.

"I don't know why but I can't lie to you, Wes. I can't tell you why but I have to leave. It's for personal reasons and I need to get away so badly you wouldn't believe. I'm not going to see my cousin."

He nodded. It had the ring of truth. He was 3/4 right about the ring.

However, he was a policeman. He decided he'd head up there the day after her and surprise her, assuming he could find her and he wasn't intruding wherever she was.

The next day, the 24th, came crashing into existence with silent thunder. Rachael felt every minute creep past her, like hundreds of slugs running across her consciousness, and it made her sick to think of the drive to Seattle and whatever lay at the end of it. She left at noon.

Smoking like a chimney and looking like she'd just been through a spin cycle, she was a sight to be seen as the pump attendant filled her tank. Oregon, no self service. She'd have to remember that when she filled up just before Seattle. She didn't plan to rent a car, whether the man she'd begun to think of as 'Fred Bullock,' wanted her to or not.

The Beatles sang 'Here, There, and Everywhere' on the radio as she pulled onto on I-5, heading North toward whatever fate had in store for her. She found herself thinking of a way to make a deal with the devil himself to get her daughter back. She didn't think she'd be much use to the little girl without a soul though.

CHAPTER 27

Arrival. 5:30, 24 February 1991.

It was Sunday and the airport was still busy as hell. Sea-Tac was often as busy as Los Angeles International. Rachael parked in the short term area and made her way into the airport itself.

Time being as it was, she found herself at the Budget car rental counter an hour and 15 minutes early. She wasn't sure if it was alright to be early or not, but she wasn't taking any chances. She sat down and began reading the book she'd brought along with her, 'The Joy Luck Club' by Amy Tan.

The story, although always changing, had the theme of parents connecting to their children. How the connection affected the lives of the children and or adults, at least that was how she interpreted it. Depression crashed into her, making her think about the soul shattering possibility that she'd never see her daughter grow to love or even hate her as an adult.

Contrary to the time before she'd left Portland, time in the airport seemed to stretch on forever. It was like salt water taffy at Cannon Beach on the Oregon coast. It stretched on and on forever.

6:56. She decided that four minutes couldn't matter. If the man who had her daughter did anything to her because of four minutes, he would be just as likely to kill her because Rachael hadn't combed her hair in the past six hours.

The counter seemed to telescope away from her as she stood, seeming like a scene from some B movie, or some lost scene from

the twilight zone, and her stomach began to boil as she gathered herself up, her bag, her book . . . her courage.

Three long seconds later she stood at the counter, heart racing, her face flushing, and spoke.

“Um, excuse me, ma’am, I was wondering if there’s a message for me here?”

The agent behind the counter looked at her inquisitively, not able to tell if she was serious or not.

“My name is Rachael Vondralin. The message would be from a Fred Bullock.”

The agent’s face lit up, “OH! Yes, I do have a message for you. I thought you’d be renting a car though, that’s what Mr. Bullock said,” she said as she handed her the envelope addressed to her from whoever the man really was.

“Thank you,” Rachael said, tasting ashes in her mouth.

Stepping back from the counter she tore the envelope open and the agent went on to something else.

The letter inside was short and to the point. It didn’t leave any room for misinterpretation.

“Mrs. Vondralin,

Rent a car. DO NOT use your own vehicle. Change clothes in the lavatory across from this counter. Put your hair up in some fashion so that it is not hanging down in your face. Drive from Seattle to Boise, Idaho. Be there within two days. Look up a company called ‘Keith Millworks’ in the phonebook once you arrive. Your next message will be there on the 26th under the name of Tom Jonas. No earlier and no later. Again, if you contact anyone I will know and your daughter will cease to exist.

This is a fun game isn’t it?

Fred”

CHAPTER 28

26th, Boise, Idaho.

If Rachael had known how close she was to Charlotte in Seattle, she would have called the cops regardless of what the man who had her said. Charlotte and Robert had been just around the corner from her, outside the Men’s bathroom, less than 5 feet away from where Robert had had her change her clothes.

That was in the past and she didn’t or wouldn’t have any idea of how close she was to her daughter until the conflict at hand reached its climax.

With two days to reach Boise, Rachael felt rushed and relaxed at the same time. She was sure that with a little bit of push, going a little over the speed limit, she’d make it to Boise with plenty of time to spare, almost an entire day. What she would do with that spare time was another issue. She drove solemnly along on I-5, back toward Portland. She would get nearly there before crossing over and heading east, toward Boise.

She stopped at a little motel just outside downtown Vancouver. She didn’t feel capable of going on, she was suddenly exhausted, tired and sore. The room was sub-par, the bed was hard and the television crappy, but it was out of the way. She needed to think, without distractions, to decide what she would do next.

She sat down on the bed, lit a cigarette, and turned on the television. She took a deep drag on the thing, inhaling and exhaling smoke at the same time. She had only smoked for a short time during college. She had quit because she had been spending so much time with John. He didn’t like it. She had always enjoyed it,

regardless of its negative effects, now, thinking of John, of Charlotte, the habit seemed repulsive, blasphemous. She crushed the thing out, looked at herself in the mirror across the room and was stunned by her appearance. She knew that she was an attractive woman, not drop-dead gorgeous, but definitely not throw away material, and she looked like she belonged on a poster for the Just Say No campaign. She went to the bathroom to shower and perhaps return to some sort of reality. She didn't realize it right then, but she had managed to get a much firmer grasp on the hard part of herself, deep down inside, in those few moments, and it would need to be a very strong hold to make it through the days to come.

An hour later, clean, made up, and looking much more like a human, she strolled out of her room and over to the Restaurant next to the motel. It wasn't much to remark upon, a few booths and tables, well worn, indicated the place had been here awhile. Food was either good or convenient, and didn't really matter to her right then.

The menu had the normal restaurant fare. She ordered soup and salad. She noticed a rather large, hairy man staring at her from the corner of the place. Waves of feeling poured over her, she could feel his terrible lust. She had no intention of staying any longer than it took to eat her food, hopefully he would stay away from her.

Halfway through her meal her hopes were crushed when the man came waddling over to sit on the stool next to her. He looked vaguely like an unshaven Winston Churchill.

"Evenin' ma'am," Winston said with a dirty smile.

"Hi," she said with as little emotion as possible.

"Can I get you somethin' to drink?"

"No, I'm fine thank you."

"Oh, come on now little lady, it ain't polite to turn down a gentleman's kindness."

Gentleman was not a word she would have associated with him. "No, THANK YOU," she repeated.

He stopped for a moment. Looked around, out the windows,

and let the comments die. Then, he went on. His hand crept toward her leg.

"Where you stayin' tonight ma'am?"

She turned and looked him directly in the eyes.

"If you lay your hand on me, I'll tear your testicles off. AND, where I'm staying is none of your damn business. Thank you."

She stood and walked toward the door. She realized she hadn't paid her bill. As she walked back to the counter she could see the man preparing for another shot. She didn't know if she would be able to do it or not, but she would try her damndest to tear his genitalia right off of his body if he made another comment. She watched his mouth start to work. It seemed to do so in slow motion.

He never finished his sentence. The young man who had been sitting in the booth directly behind them, was on his feet and throwing the huge man to the ground, as she stepped up to the counter. She was stunned. The man yelled into the face of Winston.

"Don't you understand?! The lady doesn't want anything to do with you! Leave her alone, eh?!"

Winston could only nod, the blond haired man had his hands wrapped effectively around his throat. The young man stood, helped him to his feet and let the bigger man slither away into a corner to sulk.

"Thank you," was all Rachael could think of to say.

The man nodded and went back to his booth. She reached the door, after paying for her meal, and the young man's. She turned to him again.

"Thank you. I really appreciate what you did for me there. I paid for your dinner. It was the least I could do."

He nodded and grinned a knowing and genuine smile.

She went to her room, shut the door behind her, and laid down on the bed, calling the front desk for a wake up call at 3 am.

When she woke up to the darkness of the room and the rattling of the door, she immediately thought that Charlotte had

awoken from a nightmare, scared and crying. Then she remembered where she was. She thought that maybe it was 3 in the morning and the phone was broken making it necessary to give her wake up call by knocking on the door. It wasn't a knock though. Someone was jimmying the lock. She opened her mouth to scream and thought better of it. She grabbed the phone and clumsily tried to dial 911. She managed to dial *44 before the man got the door open. He didn't shut it entirely and she couldn't see him. The motel faced away from the freeway and it was a cloudy windy night. There was no spare light.

Rachael slid to the edge of the bed and off of it, away from the open door. She was horrified.

He clicked the light on.

CHAPTER 29

Charlotte was drifting in and out of consciousness. She kept having these weird periods of time when her heart would beat really fast then almost stop it would go so slow. She couldn't breathe a full breath of air into her lungs no matter how hard she tried. It felt like someone was sitting on her chest. She kept having these coughing fits. She would cough for so long and so hard that she would start to spit up blood. She felt so hot, so tired. She felt like she was going to die.

Her wrists were swollen and puffy, some sort of smelly stuff just starting to grow on them. It was like a mold on her arms or something.

It felt so good to fall asleep when she could finally get past the pain and the shortness of breath into the land of dreams. In her dreams Daddy was there and he would let her out of the trunk and make her feel all better. Mommy was always yelling from far away, calling out to her. She was just too weak to call back.

Robert loved the road. He hadn't stopped except for the essentials since leaving Seattle and was in Boise by the evening of the 25th.

He intended to let the 'it' out of the trunk for a little while along the side of the road. He couldn't wake her up. He thought at first that 'it' might be dead, but 'it' stirred ever so slightly after he shook 'it' that he knew that wasn't the case. 'It' smelled though. He would have to stop somewhere and wash her off, before someone noticed the smell.

CHAPTER 30

When the light came on it took her a minute to adjust, it took just as long for the blond man to adjust.

The knife he held in his right hand indicated that he either wanted to make her something to eat or force her to do something she might not want to. He looked so innocent, so kind, though. She couldn't believe what was happening.

He stalked toward her, his left index finger covering his lips.

"Shhhh," he said.

Rachael slid into a corner.

He knelt beside her and expertly cut through the shoulder straps of her tank top. Her breasts spilled out over her ruined shirt, making her feel ashamed and angry. He put the knife to her neck.

She whimpered against her will, not out of fear, but out of frustration. She never thought she'd be forced by a man again, not after her father, but now . . . now.

He undid his pants, his penis erect, red and engorged with blood, was like a finger pointing at her, calling her names, returning her father to life and pissing on John's grave all at the same time.

"Suck it," he said.

Her face wrinkled, her teeth suddenly exposed themselves.

"Fuck you," she said.

He cut a 1/4 inch gash into her left arm with the knife and she cried out involuntarily. He slapped her, putting his finger over his mouth again.

"Suck it," he repeated.

She grabbed his testicles and twisted with all of her might.

He fell to his knees, never letting go of the knife, and stuck it through her left shoulder. He couldn't have missed her left lung by more than 2 inches. Oddly, the pain wasn't that bad going in, hearing it knick the wall behind her. It was the knife coming out that forced her to let go of her assailant.

He grabbed her by the hair and threw her onto the bed. Charlotte, Charlotte, Charlotte, she kept chanting in her head, like magic words that would make this all go away. He cut her pants off half tearing and half cutting.

She was in tears now. She was going to die here, unable to save the life of her daughter, die because for some reason, somehow she had done something so terrible to someone that she deserved to have this happen to her. She was just angry, not afraid, that she couldn't do anything to prevent her demise. Tears, tears of fury.

He plunged into her ferociously, tearing her, making her bleed. He smiled, making her nearly vomit. His face was that of a kind man, innocent. He pumped himself in and out of her, whispering to her as he brandished the knife, keeping it close to her throat.

"Tell me you like it. Tell me how bad you want it. Tell me."

She could feel him speed up, moving toward his climax. She couldn't imagine having the spoor of the man in her. It was beyond anything she could have imagined. At that moment, even Charlotte escaped her mind. She began to claw at the man, scraping and tearing at him, slapping and punching feebly, and she felt the knife cut into her breast.

A split second later or earlier, depending on whose perspective, she would have been dead and he would have been too late.

He grabbed him by the arm with the knife and flung him into the wall head first. The blond haired man slid slowly down, lips dragging along the sheet rock, leaving a bloody trail. Rachael passed out looking up into the face of the unshaven Winston Churchill.

Rachael woke up in the hospital not more than a half hour later. She was dazed, in pain, and low on blood. She was taking a transfusion and it was uncomfortable. A doctor came over to her.

"How do you feel, Mrs. Vondralin?"

She mustered enough energy to give him a dirty look as she said, "How do you think I feel, doctor?"

He cringed, realizing it was a stupid question.

What made it worse for Rachael was that the doctor bared a vague resemblance to the blond man who had raped her and nearly killed her.

"Did you catch him?," she asked weakly.

"Catch him? Oh, the man who, um, r—, who did this to you. Yes, the police have him. You'll have to swear out a statement, give permission for blood and tissue samples to be taken from your vaginal cavity, and so on, to ensure that he won't be released."

"How long will all that take?"

"Well, the samples and the such won't be able to be analyzed until the lab people get here in the morning, and the police really won't be able to do to much until tomorrow morning, so—"

"If you take the samples and I swear out a statement against this bastard, can I go?"

"Well, yes, but, you really shouldn't be going—"

"Listen, I've got somewhere I have to be. HAVE TO BE. There's not a choice for me. Take whatever you need from me and I'll go swear out a statement and be on my way. I should be back in about 4 days," she lied, "and Boise isn't just around the corner," she finished with a mumble.

He looked at her inquisitively and shrugged his shoulders. There wasn't much he could do to make her stay. In fact, he needed the room she was taking up, so if she could be up and around under her own power, all the better. He'd tell her how to take care of her wounds, call the police to come get her, and be done with it. After he'd take the samples, of course.

It turned out that Winston didn't stick around for the outcome of the situation. He had called 911, which she had been incapable of doing, and the police and medics had arrived. She had managed to identify her assailant in her half conscious state. Winston, whose name turned out to be Wallace, had given a statement and had driven off into the night in his 18 wheeler. The police had his home address and

phone number if they really needed him. His statement was enough for now.

So, three hours later, after a somewhat hurried set of tests, which would be less reliable as a result of the hasty way they were taken, and a statement given after picking her assailant out of a line up, she was on her way to Boise. With 163 new stitches and a bottle of horse pills to ease the pain. She wasn't supposed to be driving with the narcotic pain killer in her system. She wasn't supposed to be doing anything but taking it easy with her stab wounds still oozing. Her daughter wasn't supposed be in the hands of a maniac threatening her life. Somehow, the driving and lack of rest seemed secondary to the life of her daughter. It didn't seem crazy to her at all. First, she'd find her daughter, then kill the bastard who took Charlotte, then go home and shoot the sick fuck who had raped her. Easy.

If only.

CHAPTER 31

The morning. 25 February. Almost there.

She stopped at a roadside McDonalds. Food and rest were absolutely imperative. Not to mention she had to piss like a Russian race horse.

She went to the bathroom, bought two Big Macs, a large fry, and a Super Size Diet Coke and went to her car. She lit a cigarette and ate. Her thoughts surrounded her, engulfed her. She drifted off to sleep. Her cigarette dropped from her hand onto the ground beside the car, dying out in a puddle of mud.

It was dark. At first she thought she would have the misfortune of reliving the nightmare of the night before in her dreams. The darkness started to give way to light. Slowly, like the sun coming up. She thought she heard John laughing, talking to Charlotte in his soothing voice. She screamed to the blackness all around her. She screamed for John, for Charlotte. No reply. BUT, for an instant she was there. For a split second she knew where Charlotte was, what she was feeling, how sick she was. She screamed again, this time unintelligibly, screaming to God, screaming to anything and everything, just wanting it all to stop and return to some sort of normalcy.

She slapped the girl as she shook her.

"Hey, lady, are you alright?," the girl asked, stunned by the slap, but aware that she had just woken Rachael.

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry."

"It's alright. You'd better go now. The manager in there," the girl pointed to the McDonalds, "just called the cops."

Rachael nodded and smiled. She started the car and drove off.

Boise seemed a thousand miles away, even though she was less than eight hours away. She couldn't have foreseen these events at Christmas. Really, she couldn't have foreseen these events, ever. Too many things had happened, too much had changed in the last few months. John dead, Charlotte kidnapped and possibly dead, and Rachael raped, stabbed, near insanity, and not sure if she was capable of surviving the days ahead, was unable to digest these things with her mind.

She was barely able to move. The wounds she had sustained were by far worse than she let herself feel or believe. The wound in her shoulder went entirely through her flesh. The one in her left breast was a full 2 inches into her skin, nearly puncturing her breast plate. She was fortunate that she had been given ample sized breasts by whatever power brought her into existence.

Pain, although always with her, was a luxury she couldn't allow herself. That wasn't even the only pain, but rather the only physical pain. That and the terrible and secretly horrifying burning of her vaginal cavity where she had been so violently entered, violated.

Still her mind was other places. Plotting the demise of the unseen captor of her daughter, the final outcome of her attacker from the night before, and the path of her life after her ordeal was over. If there was a life for her to make.

Again tears pushed themselves down her face, this time without her knowledge. She was crying and unaware. Some subconscious part of her did the weeping and she was incapable of either acknowledging or accepting the fact of her pain and sorrow.

CHAPTER 32

She arrived in Boise just before midnight on the 25th. Unbeknownst to her, she once again passed very close to her daughter as she entered town. The hotel where the kidnapper and her daughter were located slid by her on the road as she ventured further into town, attempting to find the location that she would have to be at the next day.

Keith Millworks. It was remarkably easy to find even in the middle of the night. A look in a roadside phone booth, a \$1.69 map, and twenty minutes of her time took her to the location that she had been directed to. It was a nice little shop, a little bit out of the way, but it didn't seem like the sort of place that a kidnapper would frequent. Then again, she had no idea what kind of place a kidnapper would frequent.

She found a hotel nearby, a Super 8. It was a better one than she had stayed in the night before. The locks were sturdy and the restaurant held no magnetism for her. She would starve before she'd enter another goddamn hotel or motel restaurant.

She paid the clerk at the counter and found herself, somewhat against her will, engaged in a conversation with her.

"Well, that's about it then, Mrs. Vondralin," she paused, seemingly trolling for the right questions to ask, to keep the conversation going, it was obvious that she was lonely, "what kind of a name is that anyway? It sounds German or something? Is that what it is?"

Rachael smiled inside and out. John had told her the meaning of her new name not long after they had been married. The meaning seemed to have purpose now, although why or how it had happened to come to be meaningful in the context of her life was

outside the realm of her comprehension. She couldn't remember the origin or meaning suddenly.

"I don't remember if it's German or what it means. It is kind of an odd last name though."

"Sure is. That's not your maiden name, eh? I figure it ain't anyway, what with the ring on your hand and all."

Rachael nodded. The question didn't require a reply.

"What brings you to Boise?," the woman asked as Rachael tried desperately to reach the door.

"I'm here for a . . . a meeting. I'm meeting a . . . someone about my daughter."

"About your daughter?"

"Yes. It's, well, it's a long story."

"I've got all night."

"It's a long story and I couldn't tell you, even if I wanted to."

"I suppose that's the way it is with some things."

"Thank you for being so concerned though."

"Well, it's not necessarily concern, mind you, but I can see the years painting themselves onto your face as you stand here. It's sorta scary."

"God, does it show that much?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid it does. You look like you're gettin' old right before my eyes," the woman paused again, perhaps for effect or perhaps to collect her words, "take my advice, let go of whatever you're holdin' on to. Get on with your life and take a vacation."

The words weren't particularly profound or wise but the meaning and feeling behind them were genuine.

"I'll try, I'll try. Thank you. Um, I don't mean to run off on you in the middle of a conversation but I really have to get some sleep," and change my bandages, she thought, "but I have to be up early tomorrow."

"I guess you'll need a wake up call then, eh?"

"Yes. About 8:00, if you don't mind."

"Hell, I don't mind. I'll be off shift then anyway. I'll pass it on to Bobby though. He's the day shift."

"Thanks."

"You take my advice Miss. Kay'?"

"I'll try," Rachael replied with no conviction. Vacations of any sort were out of the question until she was sure that she'd be around to take one.

Wes had found an interesting connection. It was flimsy. Paper thin. It called out to him like a ghost in the night. Over the last ten years there were over 600 unsolved murders which matched no methods of any known serial killer. Of those 600, approximately 400 of them were attributed to people who had turned up missing, crimes of passion if you will. Then, of the remaining two hundred, there were about 100 that seemed to fall into a sort of 'hit and run' category. Accidental deaths from which the killers had run. Of course, there were by far more unsolved murders than the 600 that he had tagged, but the 600 were murders committed right off of freeways or near to the homes of the victims. Murders with long periods of time between disappearance and location of the body. Murders that seemed to hold meaning. Some of them he had tagged in the computer just by instinct. He had read the descriptions of the crime scenes, of the *modus operandi*, and they seemed to fit the imaginary character in his mind. The one he had dreamt up to fit the description of the character Rachael had thought to be behind the kidnapping of her daughter. The man who supposedly showed her a harmless picture of the girl in a bed. Seemingly random murders.

By the 25th of February he had narrowed down his list of murders to just under 50. Some roadside, some hometown, some unsolved. It was all a hit and miss operation, entirely instinct. Gut instinct. It was the same instinct that would either get him killed or make him a big man in the department in the years to come.

He narrowed down a list of possible locations of the killer, by hypothesis, and a list of possible perpetrators. Past offenders that were on the loose. None of them seemed to click. It was just too bad that Robert's mug shot wasn't in the books of pictures. Wesley would have known in an instant that he was the one. One look at

the man would have confirmed all of Rachael's beliefs, without a shred of evidence, at least in his mind. However, the picture just wasn't there. Neither was the location. The closest the computer hypothesis came to the actual location was Lubbock, Texas.

It was the right direction at least. South.

CHAPTER 33

Keith Millworks. February 26, 1991.

It wasn't much on the inside. She didn't expect it to be though. The exterior appearance was just enough to draw in an occasional customer and it was obvious that the interior wasn't intended to attract them in any further.

The letter was nondescript. The way it had been delivered was odd, to put it mildly. She had entered the building and a young man had followed her in. He went up a set of stairs off to the right of the door they had just come in. It took Rachael a minute to notice the sign pointing up, which said 'Office.' Upon entering the office Rachael heard her name drift off into space. Her heart nearly stopped.

"Excuse me, did you just say Rachael Vondralin?"

The young man turned around to look at her, the old man at the desk directed his gaze toward her as well.

"Yes ma'am. You wouldn't happen to be her would you?"

She began to take out her wallet, in order to prove who she was, it seemed like the right thing to do.

"I am. Is that for me?"

"Yep. Here. It was under my windshield wiper. Says 'To be picked up by Rachael Vondralin at Keith Millworks, 26 Feb 91.'"

She reached for the letter and the man behind the desk spoke.

"How do we know you are who you say you are, Miss?"

"I was getting my I.D. out when he started to hand me the letter. Do you want to see it?"

The man started to say that he did, then the young man shot

him a look. He lost the desire to see it. She tore it open in front of them as the old man shook his head. The letter had two sentences and no signature.

"Be at the county courthouse in Flagstaff, Arizona on the 3rd of March. Wait just inside the front entrance of the building wearing black lipstick and ruby red eyeliner, be there before noon." It was a strange letter, an odd request, and it wasn't signed. Again, she realized there wasn't anything about her daughter's disappearance and kidnapping that wasn't at least minimally odd.

She handed the letter to the young man. He read it and looked up at her with inquisitive eyes.

"Trust me. It doesn't make anymore sense to me than it does to you and I'm the one it's for."

"Who is it from?"

She looked at the man, really wishing she could tell someone, John, Wesley, (she spared a moment to ponder the appearance of the man in her thoughts . . .), someone. She couldn't though and didn't.

"Long story. Let's just say it's a required meeting. The make up thing is just a joke."

He nodded and let it go but it was obvious that he didn't believe her.

She left with a thank you and began her trek into the land of the Grand Canyon.

CHAPTER 34

Robert was on his way home. He had left about 8 in the morning, right after placing the envelope on the car of one of the employees of Keith Millworks. He watched from a distance to see if he took it inside. The mother of the 'it' entered just before him. He decided that it was safe to assume that she had received the letter and left. He was only 5 minutes ahead of her at that point.

He had cleaned the 'it' up during his short stay in Boise, managed to get her awake once for feeding. She had been unable to consume much but she had taken her share of water.

The woman that he had killed the night before had been left in a dumpster near a neighborhood mall. She was practice. He had tried most of what he wanted to try on the mother of the 'it' with the victim of the previous night. Suffice to say, the police would be unable to identify the victim for nearly 2 months.

Robert thought about his life, how fortunate he was not to have a vice. He didn't smoke, drink, or use drugs. He was a pretty decent person in his view of things. It was just too bad that he had to sneak around to have fun. They all died anyway. It was his world and he wanted to have his way with it but there were always rules to follow. The rules of his world didn't allow him to do what was in his nature. Not without being penalized anyway. Oh well, he'd live, some others wouldn't. He smiled.

In his trunk, Charlotte's heart stopped for a full 6 seconds. Her respiratory system returned to normal of its own volition, but she was perilously close to her end. The pneumonia eating at her body, robbing her of her precious antibodies and white blood cells, would claim her soon and would have claimed her sooner if she wasn't fighting so hard. The gangrene was another story.

She hadn't been conscious for over 12 hours. She was somewhere in the limbo of mind or spirit. Her father seemed to be there, keeping her from letting go. She wanted so badly for the pain to end, to relax, to see Mommy, to be home. None of the things she wanted most had the remotest chance of happening, at least not in the immediate future. She wet herself as she slept and whimpered.

March first. Wesley had found out about her rental car in Seattle and her assault in Vancouver. The Vancouver information was routinely given to the Portland Police Department and vice versa, considering their proximity to one another. Vancouver, Washington and Portland were only a bridge apart. Wes had read the information on Rachael with an incredulous look on his face and a drooping jaw.

A call to the hospital where she'd been treated and a trip to visit the doctor on the 28th, the one who had examined her that is, and a finish with a badge flash let him know that she had left the hospital within an hour of waking up from her attack. She had sworn out a statement, told the doctor she had to leave, and did so. Wesley asked the obligatory who, what, when, where, why questions but was told that none of the examination results or information pertaining to it could be given to him due to confidentiality restraints. He started toward the exit of the small waiting room he'd been talking to the doctor in and turned to ask one final question.

"Did she say where she was going doctor?"

The doctor shrugged and shook his head.

Wesley reached for the doorknob and left the room. He was fumbling with the keys to his car door when someone tapped him on his right shoulder. He turned to see the doctor standing behind him.

"Officer Michaels, I just remembered, after you left the room, Mrs. Vondralin mentioned she was in a terrible hurry, that's why she left so fast, and I thought that alone was odd, but then she mumbled something about 'Boise' under her breath. I can only assume she meant Boise, Idaho."

Wesley smiled. At least he knew the direction she was headed. It wasn't too gratifying to know it was the same direction his hypothesis pointed, to a degree, for a location of her imaginary kidnapper. He would have to act quickly, he might only have a week.

He knew enough about police work and how to follow someone's trail to keep up with her, but not necessarily enough to catch up with her.

Wesley went to the station. After a heated discussion with his supervisor he found out that he would get no help from the department, especially if she was in another state. So, he called in the only favor he had left in the world.

As he dialed the phone, he hoped it wasn't too late to call in this one.

The voice answered the phone and said, "Gebhardt, can I help you?"

"Yes, is this GREG Gebhardt?"

"Yes, can I help you?"

"Greg, do you remember working for a Mr. Graham, quite a few years ago, you were just a kid?"

"Uh, yes. Who IS this?"

"Wesley. Wesley Michaels."

CHAPTER 35

For Rachael time was moving like a crippled snail. She had been in Flagstaff since the 28th. It was the longest day of her life, that first one in the city. Now, the second day seemed on the verge of being even longer.

She hadn't picked up a cigarette since she'd arrived. Alcohol didn't enter into her consciousness, period. The rape, however, seemed to have found the perfect time and place to enter her mind again. The violation she had thought wouldn't affect her, outside of the obvious physical effects, was now eating at her mind like a cancer. It brought her father back to life, made her feel dirty and wrong, and she knew someone, perhaps many someones would blame her for the incident. Then there would be the court appearances, assuming they could keep the man locked up until she returned, if she returned. She wanted to cry and scream and smash everything around her at the same time. The only thing she had left, the only thing that kept her clinging to her last sliver of sanity was Charlotte, and somewhere deep in the hidden regions of her mind, Wesley.

So, she sat in the single chair in the room with the twin bed, staring at the dirty, cigarette burnt television, with no picture on it. She couldn't bring herself to move. She felt reluctant to be around people, particularly men. If she stood up or moved, then she might leave the room, and she might encounter someone and they might see what had happened written on her face, or worse, it could happen again. Only Charlotte, the desire to see her safe and somehow make her kidnapper pay, would convince her body to move. Two days. Two days longer than the entire history of the world. Two days to suffer all the pain she had ever suffered in her

life and still remain strong enough to somehow save her daughters life. Painful, jagged tears slid silently down her cheeks. They were the only ones she knew how to cry.

Rachael sat in the same spot for nearly 12 hours. It wasn't until she passed out and returned to consciousness that she moved. She went to the bathroom and then tentatively, painfully, and tearfully cleansed her recent wounds. The worst ones, on her arm and chest, didn't seem so difficult to clean, the ones that were hidden from sight, even her sight, those were the ones that hurt to clean. She cursed her father a million times to eternal hell, and then wished the same upon her attacker.

John would have protected her. She grabbed a hold of this idea, this mantra, and it somehow got her through the cleansing and disinfection of her wounds. Time disappeared. She was now trapped inside her own mind, catatonic to the outside world. She was fighting a battle within herself to retain her sanity. Less than 24 hours remained before she had a rendezvous with the man who had taken her daughter, and she could no longer speak her own name. She hadn't eaten for over 18 hours and she had her last drink of water more than 10 hours earlier.

Noises from the room next door brought her back to reality. It was now March 3rd, just after 2 in the morning, it hadn't been March 3rd for very long. She could hear the woman screaming next door. Not in pain, but in ecstasy. It made her ill. She ran to the bathroom and threw up nothing but bile for twenty minutes. She wanted to run through the wall into the next room and kill the woman and the man she had to be with, but after a bit of listening closer she realized that there wasn't a man involved. It didn't make her feel much better.

Rachael ordered a pizza and had it delivered to the front desk. Along with sodas from a nearby vending machine, supplied her with her only sustenance in nearly two days. She slept a solid dreamless sleep from 3 until 7 and awoke.

She awoke at seven from the dreamless sleep of someone who cannot afford the luxury of dreaming. Her eyes were heavy,

her limbs felt like chunks of driftwood, and her wounds, both physical and mental, burned like she couldn't believe. Part of the healing process, but painful either way. She was sure the pain wasn't over. She started on what she hoped would be the last part of her ordeal. It would be the end, one way or another. It would be over.

She put on the black lipstick and ruby red eyeliner that she'd purchased at a K-Mart along I-5, as she had been directed, and looked at herself in the mirror. If she didn't know better she would have taken herself for a vagrant, perhaps a drug addict. She looked bad. She wanted something to kill her pain, anything, but now, at this point, she knew that she couldn't let anything interfere with her thoughts, the actions that would take place before her. She had to keep her head clean, think straight, and pray.

She knew the location of the county courthouse and how to get there, it was the actual movement to the place that seemed such a colossal task. She dragged her leaden body out of the cave she was living in, referred to by some as a motel room, and checked out. By the time the evolution was over it was nine in the morning. A large glass of water and complimentary pastries were her breakfast, a cup of coffee would most likely be her lunch. She thanked the desk clerk for forgetting her wake up call and got into her car, no idea what was in store.

Her arrival at the courthouse was uneventful. Due to the fact that odd looking people often found themselves in court, she didn't look much out of place, even in her disheveled and unkempt state. The eyeliner and lipstick almost made her more a part of the landscape.

Ten o' clock came and went and it was the first time she knew she was being watched. She wasn't sure by who and she didn't feel terribly threatened, being in a building filled with cops, lawyers, (although their presence wasn't particularly comforting), and Judges. There were just as many criminals here, but somehow she didn't feel threatened. Only once did she catch a glimpse of someone who might have been watching her, but the man was gone, around the corner before she could react. Soon, so soon, it was eleven o' clock.

Robert sat outside the doors of traffic court. Wearing a bandana around his head, to hide his destroyed ear, and to fit in. He could see Rachael at the end of the hall, just near the front doors of the building. She was trying desperately not to look nervous, to look like she belonged. She was doing a rather good job of this, but Robert knew who she was, and why she was here, after all he was the one who had brought her.

Ten minutes before Noon, he arose from his chair, the first time since he had sat down upon it at just after eight. He slowly approached her, observing the walls, the pictures, the paintings, everything except her. She was only in his peripheral vision, just enough for him to make sure she was still there, but not enough for her to notice him.

Then, just feet away from her, nearly close enough to touch her, he saw someone doing essentially the same thing he was doing. Someone else was watching her. Who or why was uncertain, but she obviously didn't know or was a damn good actress. He veered off to the right of her, ignoring her as best possible. He found his way to the nearest exit and was gone.

Noon passed, no one showed, no signs appeared, and no notes were delivered. Rachael found herself alone, with no further steps to take. She felt what little bit was left of her heart start to break. She couldn't cry and didn't feel up to screaming, so she skulked out of the building and to her car. She felt dead. Charlotte probably was. She didn't know why the kidnapper hadn't shown, but it didn't really matter now. Now, she had to decide where to go from there.

CHAPTER 36

She had followed his instructions to the most minute and exact details. She drove around, confused and in a sort of stupor for over an hour. He hadn't shown.

She was on the verge of breaking down, driving off of the road, or into a canyon when she saw something that brought her first glimmer of hope since the whole ordeal had started.

It was the same sort of car that the Roland girls had described. The license plate read, "BGG RKK". Her heart skipped a beat and she nearly wet her pants.

When the man came out of the store and brought his cart full of food filled with cases of canned goods, she got a look at him from a distance and suddenly knew that this was the man who had caused all of her pain, the one who had her daughter. She wanted desperately to make him pay for all of the pain she and her daughter had suffered. The urge was now back in full force and would quite likely rob her of her sanity.

She had absent mindedly pulled into the parking lot of a Safeway. It was a familiar sight and she had been trying to talk herself out of buying booze. He came out at the perfect time, it seemed almost like divine intervention.

Rachael pushed herself as far down in her seat as possible, trying to stay out of his line of sight, and watched. He loaded the cartons of cans into the back seat of the old car and looked around the parking lot. She felt like he was sensing her and would see her and then suddenly, without any chance to prevent it, he would be gone and her daughter's life would be over.

He drove away at a leisurely pace, in no apparent hurry, and she pulled into traffic with two cars between the two of them. It was now

instinct and the word of a girl the same age as her daughter that was pushing her forward chasing the might be kidnapper in his might be car and no one in the world knew where she was besides the kidnapper and herself.

“Oh, shit. Oh, shit!,” was all she could think of to say.

Rachael thought for a moment about what she was getting herself into in the event the man she was following was actually her daughters captor. She had no weapon to defend herself, no way to contact anyone about what she was doing or where she was going. It was all fly by the seat of her pants now. Horrified was the only way to describe her. All of it was coming to a head now. Soon, if she was right, she'd see her daughter . . . just before her captor killed her.

CHAPTER 37

At approximately 7:00 in the evening, the car pulled into the driveway of a large house on the corner of nowhere in the middle of nothing. She drove by on the highway, passing at a regular pace. The sun was almost down and she could creep down the dirt road without her lights.

She waited until just before eight. The sun was down and she drove halfway down the road and decided to wait until about midnight to take the man inside off guard. She hoped desperately that she hadn't made a mistake.

Up to that point she hadn't. It was when she dozed off at about 10:45 that she made the mistake.

She didn't see Robert walking casually down the middle of the dirt road, gun in one hand. She didn't see him swagger up to the drivers side of the car. It wasn't until the cold tip of the gun's barrel came to rest upon her left temple that she came to believe that she had made a fatal mistake.

CHAPTER 38

“Mrs. Vondralin. I believe we have some business. If you’ll be so kind as to step slowly out of the car and walk toward the house?”

She lunged at the door, swinging it open, smashing it into one of his legs. He yelped and leapt backward and swung with his gun hand, hitting her directly on top of her head. Too bad her window had been open. Her vision wavered for a moment and she was afraid that she’d pass out, then it returned to normal and she felt the torrent of blood rush from her scalp out into the open air. She knew that scalp wounds always bled badly so she wasn’t sure if she was seriously hurt or not. It sure as hell felt like it though.

He took her by the arm, with no lack of force, and began to lead her toward the house. She didn’t fight. She’d have to save the little bit of energy she had left to have any hope of ensuring her daughter’s survival.

As they crept slowly toward the house, the thin cloud cover pulled apart seeming to disappear entirely, showing her the house she knew held her daughter in the moonlight.

It was approximately two and a half stories high and looked to be about the size of two houses. It had obviously cost quite a bit to build. The porch of the house seemed to go all the way around, at least as far as Rachael could see. The huge, round upstairs windows combined with the massive porch made the house appear to be an impossibly large predator smiling at them, preparing to swallow them whole if they came too close.

Her mind had reached a point of complete calm amidst a mountain of unconquerable fear. Her anger and frustration had fallen away and all that was left was raw, unsharpened fear. She couldn’t speak and didn’t want to begin the situation her daughter

was in, let alone herself. Now, with the uncharacteristic calm of one who has accepted their fate, she stepped up the stairs to the front door of the house, and felt the first sparks of hysterical anger rise in her. This wasn’t anger born from fear or desire to repay someone for the pain they had caused, rather it was the deep, fundamental anger that allows stronger animals to kill the weaker, which allows people perform impossible feats in extreme situations.

As Robert put the key into the door and opened it, he pointed Rachael’s way in. It was only the first of many doors.

She caught only a glimpse of the interior of the house before she felt another smashing blow to her head take her consciousness.

There were so many doors, she thought, almost amused, it looked like a game show set.

CHAPTER 39

She awoke in the middle of the room. She was laying on a hardwood floor with a spiral staircase only feet from her. The man sitting on the fourth stair, gun in one hand, and something else in the other, smiled as he saw her eyes open.

"Hello, Mrs. Vondralin. My name is Robert. The other names, as I'm sure you well know, were just a way of signing off my little pieces to the puzzle I knew you'd desperately put together. I'm sorry about the injuries to your head, but soon I don't think it will matter much." Again, he smiled. It wasn't a smile that instilled comfort in her, or brought humor to mind.

For a moment, she thought she heard Charlotte whimper. Robert didn't react, so she assumed she was hearing things.

"Where is my daughter?," she asked, trying to sound strong.

"Ah-ah," he said, waving the index finger of his gun hand in the air in front of him, "you're getting ahead of yourself."

Rachael lost a bit of her composure, knowing by his reaction to her question that she was indeed here.

"WHERE IS SHE, YOU BASTARD!?"

Robert seemed to enjoy her outburst. He shook his head.

"It doesn't work like that. I tell you what's going on, then perhaps, your daughter will become a part of the equation."

He looked down at the thing in his right hand, then pushed a button on it. It appeared to be some sort of remote control.

With an odd sound, a sort of clink-clink-clink-CLUNK, the stairwell he was on, began to rise off of the floor and into the ceiling above. Before she could get to her feet it was a full four feet off of the floor and by the time she began to half stumble, half run toward it, it was a full seven feet off of the floor where it stopped.

"Now, are you prepared to listen?"

She was shaking with anger. A massive dose of adrenaline poured into her veins, her adrenal gland working overtime.

"YOU FUCK! WHERE IS SHE!?"

Robert's smile faded to a smirk. He pointed the gun at her.

"Be quiet. Understand?"

She caged her frustration momentarily and nodded, but at that moment, she wanted nothing more than his neck in her hands.

"Good. Here's the way this works. You choose a door. One of the twelve in this room," Twelve, Rachael's mind commented, twelve, "one of the twelve in this room has your daughter behind it."

Rachael understood but knew there had to be a catch.

"And?"

"And, the others have various, mostly unpleasant, surprises behind them. If you can open more than 4 without, well, without stopping, your daughter goes free. If you open the one with your daughter behind it and you're still capable of leaving, you both go free. That sound like a deal?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No."

"How do I know that you'll let Charlotte go?"

"You don't. But I assure you, I am a man of my word." Again, the smile.

"I don't know what hole you came up out of, but someone's going to have their way with you someday, and I'll see it, I'll be there, I swear I will, you goddamn psychopath."

"SHUT UP," he said, again pointing the gun at her, "Now, there's one more little thing. To ensure that we don't waste any time, you have five minutes, starting now, to choose a door, or I shoot you. Just once. Then you get five more minutes and so on. Understand?"

"YES, I UNDERSTAND!"

"Good. Four minutes and 37 seconds."

Rachael knew she had reached a point in her life where control or planning meant nothing. No amount of mental toughness or

desire to rise above her problems would fix this situation. It was fate and dumb blind luck that would lead her through this situation or end it entirely. She wished at that point that she was more of a religious person, she would have taken a moment to pray.

"Four minutes." The smile.

"Fuck off," Rachael said under her breath, "CHARLOTTE!," she screamed. Robert pealed with laughter.

No sound, no reply. Rachael could do nothing but cry. The tears ran down her cheeks, and what made it worse was that HE was there to see them. She was as strong and as weak as she had ever been at that moment. She whimpered profanities and cried out things to the open air, no longer making sense.

Behind one of the doors, Charlotte regained consciousness, only for a moment, at the sound of her mother's voice. Her arms reached up in vain, wanting Mommy to take her out of the place she was trapped in. Then she fell back into a sickness induced coma.

"JOHN, WHERE ARE YOU?!?," Rachael screamed, wanting him to be there, to rescue her. He was the only man who'd ever done a damn thing for her. Now, he could do nothing. He was nothing. It was only her, this madman, and her daughter.

"2 minutes."

She was no longer capable of coherent or rational thought. She stood, screaming, hands clenched into fists, shaking them at Robert. Rachael's hair was tangled and tousled, her dust stained face cleansed in tracks by fresh tears, her eyes were those of a cornered animal. The black lipstick and ruby red eyeliner combined with her pale blood drained skin made her look as though she was a walking corpse.

"20 seconds." The smile died, the gun took aim, and his eyes locked onto hers.

She remembered. Everything came into perspective. John, Charlotte, her father, mother, grandfather, Wesley, it all suddenly made sense. All she had to do was open a door, and kill Robert.

With only two ticks of the clock left before he would shoot

her, she ran. Rachael's legs pistoned up and down as she bolted forward. Every fiber of her being reached out to find Charlotte.

She cried out mentally, psychically, and maternally, trying to reach her daughter, to no avail. Rachael was sure she was on the verge of death.

At first Robert thought she was running for the front door of the house, as one of his captives had done before, he drew a bead on her and prepared to fire. Then, she veered right and grabbed hold of the knob of one of the doors. She pulled it open.

There sat Charlotte. She was fine. Rachael reached out to her. Charlotte stood up to hug her mother and began to decay at an impossible rate. The flesh fell off of her in dusty clumps. Rachael tried to grab her, hold her together, but suddenly she was nothing but dust. Rachael blinked, and the door swung wide.

Immediately she knew it was the wrong door. Robert's laughter and the hissing she heard as it opened gave her a pretty good idea. She only saw the snake for a split second. It struck.

She knew snakes didn't bite for no reason. He must have made it angry, just so it would attack when the door opened. Its fangs struck deep into the leather of her right boot, its venom running down the length of it. She never loved a pair of boots so much as she did that moment. She felt no pain, not a prick in her leg. She was sure now that she would only have one chance.

Behind her Robert laughed heartily, sounding eerily like her dead husband John, and waited for her to go into convulsions, to die painfully, spastically and pleurably, at least for him.

She slowly dropped to her knees. The snakes fangs were still imbedded in her boot. It was obviously already agitated when she'd opened the door, it was frantically trying to remove itself from her. She grabbed it by the neck and managed to get it out of her boot. Not before she felt one of the teeth break her skin. A pinprick. The effect of that pinprick would happen fast now if at all.

She spun on him, his laughter already dying, and grinned like a hyena. His eyes showed his surprise. The gun in his hand jerked, he wasn't sure for that second what to do. She was.

She reeled back her arm and threw the snake with all of her might. One advantage of having two older brothers was that she knew how to throw. It sailed through the air end over end and she imagined she could see its tongue wagging in the wind.

Robert saw it coming and tried to move out of the way. He was drawing a bead on Rachael at the same time. He fired. And fell the nearly eight feet to the ground below.

The bullet blew a hole straight through her left bicep. It didn't even touch bone but made use of the muscle impossible. She screamed, marveling at the burning sensation that, although painful, was nothing like what she had always imagined a gunshot would be like. It wasn't the loss of muscle use that would be trouble but the fact that her artery was pumping blood freely onto the floor. She was dizzy almost instantaneously from loss of blood.

She took a step toward Robert, who was stirring, and fell to one knee. Thanks to either blood loss or Mr. Snake.

Slowly and deliberately, seeming to take forever, she got to her feet, and walked with shaky steps to him.

She noticed that one of his arms was bent at an impossible angle, bone protruding from it, blood oozing from the wound, and his gun was nearly five feet away from him.

She wanted badly to kick him but she was quite sure that if she did so she would fall down and be unable to get up. So she spit in his face and walked over to the gun.

From what seemed like miles away she heard pounding. She couldn't be sure if it was her heart or brain or the door or just her imagination. She decided she didn't care. She would make this man pay for what he had done to her and her life, and *especially* for whatever he had done to her daughter.

She looked down at the floor and saw the gun there but its distance from her seemed to telescope like the counter of a far away car rental company and the ground seemed to get almost impossibly far away. She reached for it, kneeling, and fell to the ground.

She was seeing spots now. Bolts of electricity shot through her

arm as she rolled over holding the gun in her good but blood slicked hand.

Robert was twitching, writhing, uncontrollably it seemed, as the snake tried frantically to remove itself from his torso, he looked at her with glassy, longing eyes which mirrored no soul. He seemed to be pleading with her to stop the pain he was in. She raised the gun. She laughed. She heard the pounding again. She ignored it. She wasn't sure what to do. Kill him or watch him writhe in pain until the venom killed him? She couldn't decide. Her stomach started to cramp, searing bolts of pain tearing through her entire body spastically, the venom began to affect her. Hopefully, her dose wouldn't cause the kind of pain he was experiencing. She wanted him to suffer more than she would. Her field of vision began to waver, spin.

She set the gun down. She would blow his fucking brains out but first she had to get a tourniquet on her arm. She knew instinctively that she had to do it right then or there was absolutely no chance of her surviving. She took off the boot of the leg without the snake bite, then the sock. She lost consciousness for a moment.

Rachael came to and tied a shoddy but workable tourniquet on the upper part of her arm. The blood was now oozing instead of squirting. She picked up the gun. She aimed it at the top of Robert's head. She smiled a satisfying grin. She really did want to kill him. She pulled the trigger. An empty click and snap floated through the air. Robert's head snapped toward her and he half-coughed, half-laughed at her. Then he twitched. She looked down at the gun in her hand. It was useless for its normal purpose.

She crawled toward him, slithering much like the snake that was crawling across the room away from him. He didn't see her, perhaps he no longer could. She lost consciousness again, longer this time. She came to and Robert was moving lazily, his face contorted into a grimace of absolute, horrifying pain.

She managed to get up into a sitting position, the gun in her good hand. She looked down at his face. His eyes focused on her. He tried to smile.

She brought the gun down in a malicious arc and smashed it into his mouth shattering god knows how many teeth. He squealed like a pig. She brought it down again, smashing his nose. Blood trailed out of it lazily. He coughed. She brought it up again, she would smash the top of his head in if she couldn't blow it off. Then a hand grabbed her arm. She tried to twist away from it but it was too strong, or perhaps she was too weak. She looked up into Wesley's face and passed out.

CHAPTER 40

When she awoke, in the hospital, she immediately began to scream. Not because she was in pain, which she was. Not because she felt ill, with her guts hurting, burning. Not because she wanted to know what happened to Robert. It was because she had to know whether or not Charlotte was alive.

A nurse came running in and Rachael stopped screaming and looked at her pleadingly.

"My—," she choked, her mouth, throat seemed empty of moisture, "my daughter . . . "

The nurse smiled. She had expected something else, she was still flustered but she could handle this.

"Charlotte is her name right?"

Rachael nodded vehemently.

"She's in a room two floors down. She was suffering from dehydration, malnutrition, a bad upper respiratory infection resulting from a bad break of her nose, and a nasty but well dressed cut on her right arm. The doctor says he thinks that she'll be just fine."

Rachael noticed the woman was reading the information. She looked at her questioningly. The nurse spoke again.

"The doctor said to have this information ready for you if you awoke. He was told you'd be anxious to have it."

Rachael nodded. She swallowed trying to get saliva into her mouth. She was alive. Hurt, probably nearly out of her mind, but she was alive. The rest could be worked out.

"Offic . . . Wesley. Michaels?"

She looked at the card again.

"Mr. Wesley Michaels? Is that who you're asking about?"

Rachael nodded.

"He'll live but he'll be here for quite sometime."

Rachael gave her the questioning look again.

"He's on this floor too if that's what your asking, this is ICU and—"

"What . . . happened?," she said, shaking her head.

"Uh, I'm not sure you'll want to hear that information, ma'am."

Rachael nodded again.

"I'm sorry ma'am," she paused, seeming to make up her mind,

"I'll let the doctor tell you about that."

Rachael tried to speak again but the nurse was already heading for the door.

"I'll be right back with something to drink and the doctor, I know he'll want to see you right away."

The doctor, who was introduced to her as Doctor Yamata, came into the room, and she could tell by his expression that things weren't good for someone. She was sure it wasn't Charlotte but couldn't seem to feel any better as she thought of what could have happened to Wesley. It was obvious that she was going to make it, the doctor confirmed that immediately and then confirmed the stable and improving state of her daughter . . .

" . . . but, Mrs. Vondralin, I am afraid that your friend Mr. Michaels was not so lucky. He insisted I tell you his condition as soon as you regained consciousness. He was afraid that he might not be able to see you before you awakened," the doctor paused, waiting a moment for her to absorb the situation at hand, "he said to tell you that he opened three of the doors before he found Charlotte."

Rachael gasped. She wanted to scream but the doctor kept on, not giving her the chance to lapse into hysterics before he told her whatever else he had to.

"He was injected with some sort of toxin we haven't been able to identify as of yet, hamstrung at the back of his right leg, and took a blow to his skull that fractured his frontal plate. Because of the blow he took some damage to the frontal lobe of his brain.

Suffice it to say, he's not doing too well. Still, he did manage to find your daughter, get the police to your location, and all of you to the hospital before losing consciousness."

"Is the other one, the man who had my daughter, is he, I mean, did he—?"

"Die? Is that what you want to know Mrs. Vondralin?"

"YES. Is he dead?"

"Well, let's just say he won't be able to pull anything similar to what he did to your daughter ever again."

"What does that mean?"

"He's in a coma, we don't expect him to awaken. He'll most likely die of a heart attack within a day or so, the venom from the snake bite did quite a number on his ticker. We're not giving him anything outside of basic life support."

Rachael had never wanted to pull a plug so badly in her life. However, more than wanting to pull that plug she wanted to see her daughter, hold her, hear her voice, watch her breathe, anything, just to see her. It would make everything worthwhile, every bit of pain, every drop of blood, everything.

"Doctor," Rachael said as she stood up, "I'm going to see my daughter."

Stunned by the fact that she was even trying to get up, the doctor was speechless. It wasn't until she had swung her feet over the side of the bed and began fruitlessly looking for her shoes that he was able to speak.

"Um, Mrs. Vondralin, you've lost a great deal of blood and really shouldn't be up out of your bed. Your transfusions are complete but you have several wounds, not to mention nerve damage in your arm, where you were shot . . . assuming you remember that."

She gave him the LOOK and she could tell it had an immediate effect on him. She stood up and instantly felt dizzy. He was a doctor and he was probably right, but she HAD to see Charlotte, she had no choice in the matter. She had to see her, now. Rachael still had the intravenous contraption hanging out of her arm and

various other sensors and machines attached to her, but she was bound and determined to see her daughter.

"Please, Doctor Yamata, you have no idea how badly I need to see my daughter. Please."

"Mrs. Vondralin, I—"

Her face seemed to melt before him, unbearable sadness in every feature. She could only plead one more time, genuinely.

"Please Doctor, I've got to see she's alright."

He looked around the room nervously, then back at her, smiling ever so slightly.

"Okay, but you stay right where you are. I'll have one of the nurses bring a wheelchair and I'll meet you down there."

Rachael's happiness must have been evident because the smile that appeared on her face was reflected on the doctor's as he left the room.

CHAPTER 41

As the nurse wheeled her down the hall, bag of saline something or other wheeling along beside her, she realized why the doctor had told her she needed to stay put. Every wound and every inch of her body radiated pain. Her arm throbbed from shoulder to finger, her stab wounds seemed to whine with some small internal voice, and lower, where she'd been violated, she didn't even want to think of. It would be quite sometime before she'd be whole again, at least physically. With Charlotte back in her life, she was whole in at least one sense.

The nurse didn't speak. She was a sort of animatron, wheeling her along, not knowing or caring, and that was probably for the best. If she had tried to speak, Rachael would most likely have broken out in tears and started babbling about her daughter.

The elevator ride seemed to take forever, the doors opened like cold maple syrup from a bottle and the nurse seemed to be pushing her as slow as possible. Rachael's heart rate had increased dramatically and in turn her arm wound had begun to ooze. She didn't seem to feel the pain any longer. When the nurse stopped in front of a door and then went in, telling Rachael to "Wait just a moment," Rachael thought she might burst. It was like a gift from someone somewhere that she could never repay.

It was, in some sense, a gift from herself. And, in all honesty, from Wesley as well.

CHAPTER 42

The nurse wheeled her into the room and the doctor stood on the opposite side of the bed. He put his index finger over his lips, making Rachael shudder just a little, deep down inside, thinking of Robert, and then she saw why he was doing so. Charlotte was sleeping soundly. She was too thin, too pale, and too old for her tiny body. She couldn't stop herself from crying. She tenderly grasped her daughter's hand with her good hand and held it.

Doctor Yamata walked over, pulled up a chair next to her and told her the exact details of her daughter's condition. Minor dehydration, a early case of gangrene which would result in the loss of some tissue, but nothing that would prevent normal use of her hand or forearm. A terrible upper respiratory infection resulting in pneumonia. Although it would be some time before she was well again, she would be well, eventually. Rachael would see to it personally.

It was over an hour before Charlotte came to. The nurse stayed with the two of them, the doctor left, but when Charlotte awakened, she paged him.

She slowly rolled over toward the person holding her hand, rubbing her eyes. She saw her mother and smiled. She didn't have the energy to leap up or become ecstatic, but the squeeze of Rachael's hand and the smile upon her face was more than enough. Rachael stood up and bent down over her daughter, her pain, although overwhelming, was unable to break through the emotions she felt for her daughter right then. She gripped her as tight as she could

with her one good arm. It was several minutes later that she spoke, after a coughing fit, and a session of pill taking from the nurse.

"Mommy," she said between hacking, "are we going home?"

"As soon as we can, honey," Rachael said, trying not to break down, "as soon as we can."

CHAPTER 43

Recovery time for Rachael, Charlotte, and Wesley, initially took about a month. That was just the time it took for the hospital to have it's way with them, in terms of healing their physical wounds and ailments. It turned out that Wesley had been bitten by another agitated snake of a different variety, and somehow both he and Rachael had escaped the full doses of venom from them. The snake that had bitten Rachael was never found and it's venom was not identified.

Wesley on the other hand had taken half of a rattlesnake bite, which did a number on him but wasn't likely to have killed him, assuming he got medical attention, which he had. The blow he took to the head was still a mystery, he couldn't recall it, it had been the first door he opened, and it had knocked him entirely unconscious for at least a minute as far as he knew. The door was closed when he awoke and he did not attempt to open it again. The second door he opened contained the rattlesnake. He felt the bite and had the snake off of him in just under two seconds. He knew at that point things would happen quickly. He opened the next door, stepping back with his left foot and was cut at the back of the right ankle by some sort of device in the floor. After several surgeries and innumerable physical therapy sessions which kept him on crutches and in casts for nearly a year he made it back to work.

He had found Rachael through credit card trails and a stroke of luck here and there, just before she would have encountered Robert in the courthouse. He had followed her into traffic, to the Safeway, and lost her on the highway not too far from Robert's house. On a whim he'd taken a jaunt down the road where her car was parked and which eventually led him to her.

Rachael's arm, though still functional, had serious nerve and muscle damage which prevented her from regaining full strength or feeling in her upper left arm. She was fortunate to not be the recipient of some sort of disease from her attacker in Vancouver, and her stab wounds healed as well as could be expected possible.

Charlotte, of the three, made out the best. She responded beautifully to her medication and her pneumonia and respiratory infections were taken care of within a month. The wound on her arm took a bit longer, but outside of a large scar on her forearm and the tiny remnant type lump of a broken nose on her face she was fine.

Robert didn't make out as bad as the doctor's estimate had suggested he would. He did regain consciousness and went to trial. He decided to sue Rachael for her attack on him, his dental work and various other punitive references. Suffice to say, his suit didn't go far, thankfully.

However, due to the fact that Charlotte saw him so little and Rachael was the only one to actually witness the events that had gone on in the house before Wesley's arrival, he was only convicted of kidnapping, aggravated assault, and battery. No attempted murder, nothing serious enough to keep him in jail forever. Not until he was linked to a murder in California of an older woman by the name of Mary Walters.

It turned out there were drops of blood matching hers in his car and his fingerprints turned up all over the shed she'd been found in, along with those on the makeshift club she'd been murdered with. It was her murder that put him away for good. The two sentences were graciously combined by the states of Arizona and California, and he went away for life plus 55 years without the possibility of parole. Robert had a terrible accident not long after his arrival in his new prison home and was found dead of suffocation by means unknown.

The trial of the man who had raped Rachael was another story. He got off through a loophole in the law and a slick lawyer. Turned out the man's parents were rather well off and didn't like the idea of their son spending time in prison.

Both of the trials and all of the excruciating publicity that went along with them were nothing compared to the ordeal that Rachael and Charlotte had been through. It was somehow not as satisfying as she had hoped when she heard of Robert's demise at the hands of a prison guard and the lack of conviction of the man who had raped her. It was only her desire to get Charlotte through the situations at hand and past the ordeal she'd been through that made it all tolerable.

CHAPTER 44

In January of 1995, Wesley and Rachael were married and Greg Gebhardt, Wesley's favor man with the F.B.I. who had gotten a hold of the credit card trail on Rachael and connected Robert to the murder in California was one of Wesley's groomsmen. Wesley's persistence on Rachael's case, and toe-stepping to get his information had resulted in his termination from the Portland Police Department. After which he was promptly hired by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Twelve year old Charlotte seemed to cope well with the past situation. She was never quite the same after the ordeal, never quite as innocent or trusting, but perhaps that was for the better.

In the end, although it wasn't happily ever after, it did end, leaving only the memory of something with a unforgettable nightmarish quality behind.

the end

